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THE SUN'S
BRIGHT CHILD



KEAN AS SIR GILES OVERREACH
IN *New Way to Pay Old Debts*
After a painting by G. Clint

THE SUN'S BRIGHT CHILD

THE IMAGINARY MEMOIRS
OF EDMUND KEAN

BY
JULIUS BERSTL

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PREFACE

Edmund Kean may be counted among the very few actors who, even long after their death, enjoy international fame. The memory of his artistic and all too human personality lives on and fills the imagination of those that come after him with ever new inspiration. In spite of all the shortcomings and limitations of this histrionic genius, the effect which Kean's art exercised on his contemporaries was out of all proportion; it was extraordinary, even unimaginable. The hysteria of worshippers among his audience was by no means limited to the circle of women only. We have knowledge that Byron, for instance, was drawn into the magic atmosphere of the artist's powerful acting to such an extent, that he, on one occasion, when Kean, in his unequalled masterly fashion, was playing a madman's part, was seized by an epileptic fit.

Heinrich Heine, undoubtedly an unprejudiced eye-witness, wrote about Kean: "He was one of those unique beings who interpreted less the common, simple emotions, but much more the uncommon, bizarre and extraordinary ones, taking place in the human heart, by amazing movements of his body, by incredible inflections in his voice and an even more incredible look in his eyes."

And further: "Kean was one of those individuals whose character seems to be impervious to the many frictions of civilization. He was made—I won't say, of better, yet—of totally different stuff from all others. He was a gauche oddity with a single-minded talent, yet owing to this very single-mindedness, eminently superior to anything existing; inspired by that boundless, unfathomable and unconsciously diabolic-divine power which we are apt to call 'the demonic'."

And finally: "It is impossible to elucidate Edmund Kean's individuality even by the most minute descriptions. Many have successfully imitated his manner of declamation, the abrupt, halting way of speaking; for it is easy for the parrot to imitate most deceptively the voice of the eagle. But the eagle-eye with its intrepid fire, unafraid of looking into the glaring sun, Kean's eye with its magic brilliance, with its flame of genius—not a single one of those theatre-birds could make its own."

Agreed: In spite of all these artistic qualifications the memory of Edmund Kean, the man, could never have stood the severe test

of time, had it not been for Alexandre Dumas's hundred years old, emotional thriller *Kean*—sentimentalized and distorted though it is—a play that afforded, and still affords even to-day—to many continental actors an excellent opportunity to bring into play their interpretive powers to the fullest extent.

I frequently had the chance of attending continental performances of Dumas's *Kean*. The romantic glamour of a strolling player's life fascinated me; and, seeing again Dumas's play performed by the great German actor Albert Bassermann, I felt the same irresistible spell coming over me. But although I was fully aware of the grand theatrical merits of Dumas's robust play I realized that it could in no way compare with the amazing vitality of Kean's actual life-story.

That's why I felt inspired to write a book about this famous English actor. It is not my intention to dwell on a complete scientific account of Kean's life. The reader who prefers this kind of biography will profit by studying Hillebrand's monograph about Kean¹ or Giles Playfair's biography² which contains some new material, hitherto unpublished. Also James Agate's interesting book *These Were Actors*³ partially concerns itself with the actor Edmund Kean.

Instead, I felt impelled to write the novel of an adventurous, uncommonly varied stage-player's life, of a stage-player whose tragic descent from radiant heights springs from the sombre, impetuous passions of a man marked by genius and all the weaknesses of a human nature. At the same time I endeavoured to show the man Kean as a type of the "Eternal Mime", the actor who, even outside the theatre-world, was condemned to shine in a variety of parts.

There is to be found in the changing phases of Kean's destiny everything that the fantasy of a writer could invent. Tension and climax; crime and punishment; the happiness, the sadness of a human being who reaches out for the fire of the gods, but who—alas! a prey to his earthbound impulses—is hurled into the dark and swampy places of the underworld.

Are there not all the essentials of a novel, of a powerful drama?

I have restricted myself to the mere facts. If I had given more, I fear I should have overdrawn or dimmed the outlines of a paradoxical character. It was my aim to delineate clearly by

¹ Harold Newcomb Hillebrand, *Edmund Kean* (New York, 1933).

² Giles Playfair, *Kean* (London, 1939).

³ James Agate, *These Were Actors*, Extracts from a Newspaper-cutting Book 1811-33 (London, 1943).

omissions and simplifications the significance of this kaleidoscopic life which reflects the typical passions of an actor who finds himself at the edge of the abyss if he is not playing a brilliant part, and who, in the course of a glorious career, unlearns to distinguish clearly the illusions of the boards and the reality of the world. On the other hand, a most vital and telling element seems to me to be lacking were I to have limited myself to a mere description or report.

Thus I have chosen the form of a fictitious autobiography to tell the life and adventures of Edmund Kean. For the temperament of the artist, the moods of a restless, insatiable mind, in my opinion, must be allowed to speak for themselves.

It goes without saying that all documentary evidence (letters, newspaper reports, etc.), quoted here, are in the original text.

If this book should supplement the existing biographies and, simultaneously, set to rights the picture of Kean's personality, sentimentally distorted in Alexandre Dumas's play, the task which I attempted will have been accomplished.

J. BERSTL

London, 1946

EDMUND KEAN

“Thou art the sun’s bright child!
The genius that irradiates thy mind
Caught all its purity and light from heaven.
Thine is the task, with mastery most perfect,
To bind the passions captive in thy train!
Each crystal tear that slumbers in the depth
Of feeling’s fountain, doth obey thy call!
There’s not a joy or sorrow mortals prove,
Or passion to humility allied,
But tribute of allegiance owes to thee.
The shrine thou worshippest is Nature’s self—
The only altar genius deigns to seek.
Thine offering—a bold and burning mind,
Whose impulse guides thee to the realms of fame,
Where, crowned with well-earned laurels, all thine
own,
I herald thee to immortality.”

LORD BYRON

PROLOGUE

I am not a writer. My element is the stage; my means of expression is play-acting. Nevertheless, I take up my pen reluctantly and diffidently because I should like to recount the story of a career which was prematurely broken up by the weaknesses, errors and vices of a man whose task it should have been to hold up the mirror to the world around him. But he smashed the mirror through petulance, pugnacity, the arrogance of an actor, and the uncontrollable passion of playing with fire.

And yet—if a god or devil came and offered me an elixir and spoke: Drink! Rejuvenate! Live your life again! Without a doubt, I should choose to relive my life with the same errors in which I squandered my days. For in these errors lies hidden the spice of life itself and that ecstasy-bringing yet frightening state of mind that lifts man out of himself. It creates in him the blissful feeling of irresponsibility. In this irresponsibility and lack of reason resides the source of his power.

I am only forty-five years old, yet my end is near. As I daily crawl through Richmond Park, so full of beauty in its autumn colours, Aunt Tid is my faithful companion. She is an old woman now. Yet she will outlive me—she, with her birdlike mobility, her energy, her fanatic loyalty to me. She—and the vagabond woman who bore me and who now is living with me in my house like a caged vixen.

The people of Richmond nod to me when they meet me, and their half-fledged daughters curtsy and shyly press flowers into my hands. I smile a grim and hollow-eyed smile; my attitude is that of a condescending grandseigneur.

Drama!—I feel chilled to the bone, and the sensation that takes hold of me at the sight of these young and pulsing lives is—envy. They may play their part—girls who grow into women and command the world of men to worship at their feet; whilst I listen anxiously for my exit cue, soon to be whispered by the invisible prompter; and I stumble on my way with shaking knees, the shadow of a player, feeling stage-fright even at—death.

But I am still alive and breathing; and the aim of my few remaining days shall be to catch the image of my life in a mirror of words.

I will hide nothing, embellish nothing. Truth ennobles; even if she has to uncover the ugly and sordid things of life.

I begin. . . .

CHAPTER I

DAWN OF LIFE

NANCE CAREY was a girl of few talents, but could boast of a pair of big, black, sparkling eyes. At the age of fifteen she had run away from her father who, as a provincial comedian, eked out a precarious living, mostly with a programme of mimicry in the style of that day, imitating popular actors and singers. She spent her youth among barn-stormers. She was a gipsy through and through. In her veins lurked the eccentric blood of her grandfather, Henry Carey, who was the illegitimate son of George Saville, Marquis of Halifax, and famous as the composer of "Sally in our Alley", and other songs, besides a writer of the stage, whose farces gained success. One of these plays, produced in 1715, had the strange title *Marriage and Hanging*. Stranger even was the fact that the author of this play went through both these experiences himself. He married and became the father of that strolling player whose daughter was Nance Carey. Henry Carey's life was not all too rosy; misfortune seemed to dog his footsteps; the world presented itself to him as a dark and cold place. Deprived of his sparkling wit through depression he could see little inducement in life; one day his wife found him dead hanging from a beam at the attic, his face sullenly turned to the wall, with only a halfpenny in his pocket.

Nance Carey, his granddaughter, joined a company of strolling players. But when the strolling business was bad, Fate took her to London to peddle wares on the streets, and to gain the attention of a certain Edmund Kean, an architect's assistant, later a clerk to an advocate. This young man fell in love with the vagabond girl. He had a bent for rhetoric and a love for the bottle. He was a very much liked speaker at debating clubs, and even became the author of *Sound without Sense, or the Portrait of a Debating Club*, consisting of imitations of public speakers, and the discussion of the question, *Which is more proper to oil a Man's Wig with, Honey or Mustard?* The playbill of the Royalty Theatre, Well Street, for 9th September 1788, announced "for this night only" a performance of the play, and jointly the author's first appearance on the stage.

This Edmund Kean may have had great abilities and a good look with his long dark hair, his big dark eyes. But he developed

into an inveterate drinker, thereby losing his post at Mr. Wilmot's, the architect's, and starving. Melancholia took hold of him, creating in him a feeling of utter loneliness. He became restless and excited. One day, in his twenty-third year, he climbed on to the roof of a house and walking along the guttering lost his balance and crashed to the ground; thus ending the life of a man without aim or ambition.

Nance Carey had borne him a boy. This birth out of wedlock threw the first dark shadow across the boy's life. He was born in the neighbourhood of Gray's Inn on 4th November 1787 in very poor circumstances, kindly people providing the young mother with underclothes and bed linen.

For three months Nance Carey had nursed the baby, which, swathed in rags looked at her in wonder out of its black eyes. After that the old unrest had driven her to take up her wandering life again leaving the little bundle of humanity to the young father.

An irresponsible youth given to melancholia is hardly a fit person to bring up a child. Thus I grew up like the lilies of the field—Edmund Carey—or as I called myself later, Edmund Kean. I roamed about in old and poor quarters of London and played hide-and-seek in the nooks and crannies of decayed and tumble-down houses. I went through life barefoot, ragged, hardly distinguishable from a gipsy boy, sometimes going about as a child with a brass collar bearing the legend "This boy belongs to No. 9 Lisle Street".

I still remember my uncles Aaron and Moses Kean, two older brothers of my father. There is little to say about Aaron. He was a tailor and a hard drinker. Uncle Moses, however, was a well thought of, respected person, rather popular in the world of the theatre as a comedian and by reason of his imitations of actors and public persons. He used to travel about in the country most of the time to entertain people with his witty imitations, which were announced as "Moses Kean's Evening Lounge". At one time in Cambridge—by a strange trick of Fate—he was billed for the same night as George Saville Carey, my mother's father, matching his histrionic talent against that of the provincial comedian.

It happened also, though only sporadically, that Moses Kean appeared at the Haymarket Theatre, at Covent Garden, and Drury Lane, where the Londoners always received him with copious applause. His popularity was almost equal to that of the famous comedian Samuel Foote, who like himself limped on the stage with a wooden leg. Such was the popularity of Moses Kean that

his audience invariably began to applaud when they heard the stumping of his wooden leg behind the scenes.

He lives in my memory as a square-built man with a mop of black hair. He used to wear a scarlet coat, white satin waistcoat, black satin breeches, bright blue stockings; and a cocked hat adorned his head.

The brothers lived together, their sister, Mrs. Price, looking after their house. But as Moses was mostly away from home performing in the provinces and, besides, died whilst I was still a child, and Aaron a sulky drunkard, little or no support could be expected from such quarters.

When I was four years old, my mother reappeared and claimed me as her property. Not that she was consumed with longing for her child; by no means! but she thought me old enough now to work and thus to contribute to her livelihood.

In Drury Lane children showing talent for play-acting were required for the forthcoming production of the opera-ballet *Cymen*. My mother, being certain that I would suit, took me along and stood for hours waiting, together with other mothers, till at last her turn came to take Little Edmund to the producer. After examining me with critical eyes he found me suitable and cast me as "Cupid". The public took kindly to me on the first night. I was, therefore, permanently engaged to play demons and fairies, even monkeys in pantomimes and fairy-plays.

I was naturally then unaware of the glorious past of this theatre, also of the great work done there by David Garrick. But I felt instinctively that the space behind the footlights constituted a pulsing world of its own, to which it was worth while devoting one's life. I revelled in the smell of glue, paint and backcloth everywhere behind the scenes. But it did not satisfy my hunger for knowledge. When the thunder-apparatus was set in motion, when the drum filled with peas was whirled round to simulate wind, rain and hail, when the multicoloured Bengal-lights flashed up, and the glittering costumes of the dancers dazzled the eyes of the public, I, in my disguise, felt intuitively the urge of man to escape from himself and to aspire to heights undreamt of by the man in the street. And I realized in a flash with the sureness of a sleepwalker, that here only was life: masquerade, make-believe; in one word, an escape from humdrum existence into another sphere.

Eagerly and greedily I watched.

Miss Tidswell took me under her care. She was not by any means a shining light at Drury Lane. It was to her former

associations with the Duke of Norfolk that she owed her modest position there, which was only in keeping with her histrionic talents. In the course of years she had become, as it were, the property of the theatre. She was a good soul, whose motherliness became even more pronounced with advancing years.

The state of utter neglect in which she found me was like grist to her mill. She took me along to her tiny room and lavished all her kindness on me. Later she initiated me into the wonder-world of Shakespeare. She allowed me to stay behind the scenes during rehearsals, when John Philip Kemble recited his parts with rolling accents in *Macbeth* or *Othello*. Not that I could understand the meaning of the text or could scale the heights of Shakespeare's poetry. Yet the music of the words, the intoxicating thunder, whispers, singing, or even the rattling in the throat of the actors echoing in the wings thrilled me to the marrow. It was like strange mystic music which, without revealing itself, entered into my whole being. I was exalted, yet I suffered. I tried to imitate what I had heard. "Aunt Tid", as I called Miss Tidswell, smiled consent and spoke encouraging words to me. Under her guidance I was able to penetrate, step by step, into the enchanted forest spreading before me in mysterious and undreamt force and beauty. Furthermore, this actress with her fanaticism for education, insisted on my going to school, so that I should not shoot up like a rank weed but be trained to form an idea of an outside world, wide and immense.

In those early years of my life I must have been like a wild young bird, that eagerly submitted to the teachings of my human masters, awaiting the moment of escape when the cage door would be left open.

I gladly allowed Aunt Tid to spoil me. This kindly actress even forestalled my desires in making me familiar with the awe-inspiring and intoxicating figures of drama. Sometimes I persuaded myself that I was her son, and the late Duke of Norfolk, whom they called "Jockey", my father. Maybe, I had the honour of being brought up at Arundel Castle, and there they sometimes, I did not know why, had called me "Duncan!" I dreamt of every room, passage, winding and turning in Arundel Castle; and I took into my head I was very like the old Duke. This provided food for my fancy; here was a part which greatly appealed to me even though I only played it to myself.

But, alas, the humble school in Orange Court, Leicester Square, in which I learned my ABC, and the school kept by Mr. King in Chapel Street, Soho, were bitter morsels as against all the other

dishes of relish put before me by Aunt Tid. I hated the set pedantry of the teacher, hated the gloomy atmosphere of the classroom. I decided to escape from this bondage. But, when I declared to my mother that I was going to be a sailor, she simply waived my remark aside and said, "Silly nonsense!" Thus, I felt, I was left to my own devices; and being of the opinion that a young man of ten years of age was entitled to some kind of independence, I left my mother and Aunt Tid one morning and ran away to Portsmouth.

CHAPTER II

CRAFTY ULYSSES

THE road to Portsmouth was long, dusty and stony. After toilsome wanderings, I at last reached the harbour with bleeding feet and a woefully empty stomach. Notwithstanding this, I at once made my way to the captain of a brig, ready to set sail for Madeira. I offered him my services. The captain looked me up and down without a word, spat out a well-chewed quid of tobacco and nodded assent. Thus I became a cabin-boy of the glorious British Merchant Navy.

Like a monkey I climbed up the rigging of the two-master. Often I stood against the railing, full of impatience that there was not yet a pirate ship in sight, no sea serpent, no lonely coral reef waiting to wreck the slender brig in stormy weather. It was on such an occasion that the captain seized me, threw me over his knee and gave me, the dreamy cabin-boy, a good whipping with the end of a rope.

It seemed all so different from the high flown expectations and dreams I had conjured up about a sailor's life.

At night, as I lay in my narrow hammock with wide open eyes and angry-defiance in my heart, it was brought home to me that reality and fantasy were two opponents, only too ready to play false with each other. I realized that I had miscalculated this venture into the unknown, and that my fate was closely bound up with the boards that meant the world rather than with the planks of a merchant ship.

During my short life I had never heard of Crafty Ulysses. But soon I became aware that this gruff captain had to be met with a trick or two on my side, if I did not want to face a dark and joyless future as ship's scapegoat.

An innate histrionic instinct came to my assistance in my defence; and thus I played—if I may say so—with success the first convincing part of my life.

It was like this. When the captain, on one occasion, again got hold of the rope to chastise me, it came to pass that the pitiable cabin-boy was taken with a sudden seizure. The captain at once dropped the rope and scratched his head sullenly. The devil! He never had bargained for a cabin-boy of that sort. What a wretched little thing was this, that lay before him with emaciated arms and

narrow chest, with grey pallor and expressionless eyes? A piteous, miserable kitten dying under your hand, if you dealt him a harmless kick or two in the ribs.

They had to put me carefully into my hammock and feed me on porridge, till we sighted Madeira. In Funchal they did not lose any time in transporting me to a hospital. The captain scented a mysterious illness, threatening them all, behind this puzzling palsy. The doctor shook his head. And as he did not know how to deal with this malady, he deemed it advisable that the patient should be taken home by the brig, when it had finished unloading.

The captain cursed and spat tobacco and gall, but it did not help him. Like a piece of fragile glass I was stowed away, and when the boat dropped anchor at the home port, I was taken ashore with the utmost care imaginable. There, on the quay of Portsmouth, they deposited the frail burden; they heaved a sigh of relief and left this little dying creature to his fate. But after the porters had hurried away with an embarrassed "Goo'bye", this little bundle of misery came to life. I lifted my nose out of rugs and bandages, sniffed the keen morning air, forgot palsy and precaution, jumped up and tore away as quickly as my legs would carry me.

The captain standing at the railing stared after me with wide-open eyes as after an apparition.

At that time my mother was again showering the benefits of her talent on a provincial public. When I returned to London, battered and bruised, I found the nest empty. This did not grieve me, as I called on Aunt Tid; and this dear old soul, happy at the return of the prodigal, gave me a hearty welcome and made me feel at home once more.

The old life began again. On the stage and behind the scenes of Drury Lane, in the dressing-rooms of underlings, among the lumber and props.

Through watching the actors closely and mimicking all their tricks, I learnt the player's art, as I stood hidden behind the scenes, reciting their parts. I made the atmosphere, in which these players moved, my life-element, and drank in the art of play-acting—as it were—with the dust of the stage.

The actor, so much I understood, shunned, as far as possible, the world outside and found his life in the theatre more vital and essential.

The light of the candles which shone on the player was for him the true light; it enhanced his glory; its warmth and intensity

made the sun in the heavens appear cold and cheerless in comparison. The part he acted was the essence of life to him, was air and water, fire and earth, and, as such, merited a fervent worship.

These conceptions entered into my consciousness as if they were the most natural in the world and determined the course of my life. Moreover, I soon mastered the jargon of the stage and made myself familiar with the characteristics of the leading players. I often mimicked their mannerisms to the amusement of small-part actors and stagehands.

Small wonder that right from the first John Philip Kemble became a target of my mockery. Poor old John! For years he had been suffering from asthma, so that it was painful to hear him gasp and cough during the performances. I cannot vouch for the truth of the following anecdote but, even if it had been invented, it goes to show the state of mind the great tragedian was in during his later years and the tragi-comic consequences this state of mind brought to a head:

One night as he lay dead upon the stage as the murderous Macbeth, he felt almost suffocated, and at length was obliged to sit up and cough, to the great amusement of the house. When Jack Bannister, that last pupil of Garrick, likewise a great actor and wit, heard of this, he said, "Ah, poor fellow, it must have been a churchyard cough."

One day, before a crowded circle of laughing spectators, I mimicked the great John Philip Kemble with his pathos, his rolling voice, even to the rattle in his throat, his mirth-provoking pomposity and conceit and all his human idiosyncrasies, and this with astounding self-possession and assurance. The mighty historian who was watching his living image from behind some scenery, his actor's vanity wounded to the core, seized me by the collar, accosted me in the pompous accents of a tragic hero, "Wait, my boy, I'll teach you to mock at an honoured king of the stage!"—shook me and kicked me so violently, that I fell down a trapdoor and made my escape with aching limbs.

For a long time after that I felt no desire to show off my great talents to an admiring audience. But in spite of it all I grudged neither pains nor trouble in fostering and furthering the gifts which I felt strongly in me. And whilst Aunt Tid wore herself to a shadow worrying about me, because I often stayed away from home for days on end, I revelled in a feeling of freedom and triumph, when, in suburban taverns, before a motley crowd of artisans and soldiers, habitual drinkers and vagabond women, I

had the chance to show off my programme: recitations, dances, interpretations of actors, the mimicking of monkeys and devils.

"Good heavens, Edmund," complained Aunt Tid with reproachful pride, "you have been gallivanting about for three long days again."

"Look here, is this nothing?" I said triumphantly, throwing a handful of coppers which I had collected into the lap of the astonished fostermother. "I have already my public, even though it smells of garlic and not of musk and lavender. Give me time! I tell you, fine ladies with gloves and real live lords will applaud me one day."

Then came the time when Mrs. Clarke, a childless, well-to-do lady, entered my life.

The prospects of play-acting for my mother were at that time again very unfavourable; she, therefore, exchanged the calling of acting for that of a pedlar. She went from house to house selling French perfumes and with her eyes of beautiful colour, form and brilliancy which stood in a remarkable contrast to an exceedingly shabby attire, she aroused the curiosity and sympathy of Mrs. Clarke.

"Buy one, please Ma'am," pleaded my mother with a cheerful smile. "Maréchalle Powder, Jessamine Pomatum, Mille Fleurs, Hungary Water, genuine Eau de Luce, all genuine! Believe me, Ma'am, only sore need is driving me to knock at your door."

"I suppose you have known better days once upon a time," remarked Mrs. Clarke, intrigued by Nance Carey's fiery eyes.

"Actually I am an actress," replied my mother with pride. "I gave musical and dramatic soirées at Hampstead, Highbury Barn, and other villages in the neighbourhood of Town. But as the times are bad, you see. . . ."

Mrs. Clarke's curiosity was aroused. She bought some powder and lavender water, paying double for each. She asked the poor actress to let herself be seen again and made her a present of a tiffany painted skirt for which she was very much obliged indeed.

Thus it became a custom for Nance Carey to call regularly on Mrs. Clarke; now and then she spoke to her of her little son Edmund. Acting is in his blood, she said with pride. Then there came a day when my mother sent me to the house of that rich lady in a case of emergency.

I must have knocked rather violently at the front door because, when the old man-servant opened it, he seemed to be most an-

noyed. Yet he let himself be persuaded to announce me to his mistress.

"Master Carey, Ma'am, is below and wishes to speak to you. He belongs to Miss Carey—that brings us perfumes."

Mrs. Clarke had been, at that moment, deeply absorbed in a sentimental novel from which she could hardly tear herself away.

"Tell him to send up his message," she answered, feeling a pleasant shudder run down her spine.

"Ma'am, I did, but he says he must speak to you."

With an air of resignation Mrs. Clarke shut her book.

"Well, show him up."

So it came about that a minute later I was standing in the centre of the threshold—a slender, pale, diminutive boy, really eleven years of age but not taller than nine—my whole appearance that of half-starved poverty but redeemed by the gipsy black of my sparkling eyes and my raven locks which might have attracted the romantic turn of mind of the lady.

I presented myself with the bow and the air of a prince.

Mrs. Clarke, obviously, was so struck, and so moved that she stood upright before me, without saying a word, whilst I spoke in a courteous tone—and maybe with a somewhat theatrical manner:

"My mother, Madam, desires her humble duty, and requests you will be so good as to advance her the loan of a shilling to take the spangled petticoat out of pawn you were so good as to give her. She would not have troubled you but we are going to play at Islington to-night."

Mrs. Clarke looked up in surprise. She asked:

"What, do you act too?"

I nodded, feeling very important:

"Oh yes—I can act a good many things."

"What, for instance?"

"Chiefly Shakespeare, Madam. Scenes from *Richard the Third*, *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth*. I can play Harlequin and the Clown, too."

Mrs. Clarke smiled, manifestly taken aback.

"Here is the shilling," she said rather hurriedly, "but I should like to see you act."

I answered with a gallant bow:

"I should be so very happy."

She fluttered round the room excitedly.

"Will you come to-morrow evening?" she asked, blushing as if in embarrassment.

"I'd love to come," I smiled, but without any trace of bashfulness. "What shall I do, Madam?"

"What you like best."

Without pausing I replied:

"Oh, that will be *Richard the Third*."

"Very well!"

"I begin with the tent scene. By the way, I must have a tent," I demanded looking around in search for something suitable as a tent.

The lady immediately opened the folding doors and led the way to a larger apartment handsomely furnished.

"You shall act here," she said.

My eyes actually blazed with delight.

"Have you a little bell, Madam, to ring when I am to begin? I ring it myself, you see, but may I have a little music before?"

Mrs. Clarke considered for a moment, then said:

"You may, my boy. I know a young lady who will play the 'Battle of Prague'."

My eyes were flashing with delight.

"Oh, that is the best music."

It was settled I was to come exactly at half-past six the next evening. And when the time had come, the guests were assembled, all seated in front of what was to represent the Royal Tent on Bosworth Field.

I came—the same threadbare jacket and trousers—but my face and my hands were quite clean. I threw myself on the sofa, the little bell was in my hand—Richard was asleep. The "Battle of Prague" began, but in less than ten minutes the bell was rung, and Richard started up from his uneasy slumbers.

I had not got half through the scene when the ladies were all melted into tears. Loud applause crowned my exertions. The tea was brought and the child actor had to take a piece of cake—but no—he begged first to act the fight with Richmond.

"What, by yourself?" asked the spectators smilingly.

"Oh yes—you'll see, I can do it very well by myself."

And, in effect, I did, to the astonishment of all who looked at me.

When the performance was at an end, a gentleman threw half a crown upon the stage. Neither Richard nor Edmund Carey noticed or appeared to notice it, however the example was followed by a handsome collection of silver presented to me.

I shook my head saying:

"I regret not to be able to accept your bounty; Mrs. Clarke is my mother's best friend."

But the mistress of the house reckoned up the amount to me, and giving me a crown to take home, desired me to come to-morrow for the rest.

Thus it came about that Mrs. Clarke grew fond of me and welcomed me into her home as her own son.

By Jove, none of the comforts seemed to give me so much delight as my little bed, the first clean one I had ever slept in. The curtains were of a cotton with roses printed all over it. I called it enthusiastically my "bed of roses".

Mrs. Clarke taught me the conventions of high society and took a real delight in showing me off to her relations and neighbours to exhibit my talents.

At the age of twelve public performances were arranged for me to give recitations. I became "the infant prodigy, Master Carey," or "the celebrated Master Carey", and even was presented to a Covent Garden audience. My talents as a public reciter gained me prominence at the Crown and Anchor in Leicester Square, and at the Rolls Rooms in Chancery Lane, among other things reciting the whole of *The Merchant of Venice*, and sometimes gaining a reward of fifty pounds.

The public consisted of inquisitive society ladies, of elderly gentlemen with spectacles and portly bellies, some few persons of rank and a number of odd-looking journalists. I noticed only too well that here there was a different field from the one in the suburban taverns, with their motley audience, before which I had acted up till now; and I was by no means slow to prefer the perfumes of the fashionable world to the garlic odours of the guests at the poor inns.

A soir  e which was arranged for me at Windsor, drew the attention of King George to the "infant prodigy", and thus he commanded me to come before him and recite Shakespeare to him and his Queen Charlotte.

I still remember the occasion vividly. The King wore shabby clothes, and the Queen, a princess of the house of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, vied with her exalted spouse in commonplace simplicity. The Queen's hairdresser who, for reasons of economy, also fulfilled the duties of a valet, involuntarily caught one's attention, in contrast with the miserly royal couple, by the splendour of his raiment and his courtly bearing.

After I had finished, George III, turning to the hairdresser, whispered, "What, what? Shall we make him a little present? What do you think? Have you a few shillings handy?"

With inimitable courtliness the valet put his hand into his

pocket and produced a gold sovereign. "Oh, no!" mourned George III at the sight of the gold, and the Queen shook her head disapprovingly.

But the hairdresser without moving a muscle of his sphinx-like face let the gold-piece slip into my hand.

"Because he recited Shakespeare!" sighed the King, yieldingly, "and because I love Shakespeare!"

"Because Your Majesty loves Shakespeare," echoed Queen Charlotte going back to her knitting.

"I thank Your Majesties," I stammered, embarrassed at so much favour and niggardliness and left the room. But all London talked of my visit to Windsor Castle and of the unusual extravagance which the august sovereign had shown.

After this event even John Philip Kemble could not help taking notice of my talent; and although I had exposed him to the laughter of his colleagues, he now entrusted me with the part of Arthur in *King John*, Kemble playing the King, and his sister, Mrs. Siddons, Constance on this memorable occasion.

When I, under the name of Edmund Carey, made my first appearance in that part at Drury Lane, no presentiment told me that some day at the same place, I would celebrate as Edmund Kean successes which were to put those of John Philip Kemble into the shade.

What I, however, did feel at this point was the sensation of being fully fledged. But the restless blood of my mother which surged through my veins drove me to try my luck on the road.

The joys and sufferings of my wandering years began.

CHAPTER III

HORNS AND DRUMS

RICHARDSON'S booth was an important part of every fair for a hundred miles round London. The garish blue and red of its paint vied with the most glaring colours and attractions of his competitors. He who wishes to enjoy genuine art—be he farmer or labourer, butler or maid, lackey at the manor or beadle of the justice of peace—will get his money's worth at Father Richardson's.

"Tragedy, comedy, farce and pantomime—just walk in, ladies and gentlemen! Here is food to be had for every palate, enjoyment for every heart! We tickle your fancy, we move you to tears. Our art is to mix the bitter with the sweet; we scourge your vices, we praise your virtues! Just walk in, ladies and gentlemen!"

On the dais, in front of the entrance, stood the artists in tinsel and tarnished gold, in bright, glossy cotton, silver and coloured paper, with bells on their faded stockings, with shoes long down at heel. Their cheering and hungry smile hovered over the tough crowd which, in distrust and expectation, had gathered at their feet. Trumpets shrieked like wounded bulls; violins trilled like chirruping birds, but it was the rumbling of the drums that attracted the villagers.

Like a hero of olden times towered Richardson, this brawny north-countryman, at the cash-desk. In a many-buttoned green frock-coat and a crimson vest; with leathern netherlings and flamboyant sash he was a prominent showman at all fairs. A pleasure to the old, an example to the young, he shouted his "Just going to begin—now's your only time!" and thundered into the air, "Now, then, pit or box, pit or gallery, box or pit? Pay your shilling, sir!—Here comes the Duke! make haste! Let his Royal Highness pass! Pit or box, your Royal Highness?—Just gallery? Then pay your threepence and pass on, Tom-fool!"

A boy of thirteen turned somersaults on the hollow planks. Untiringly his "salto mortale" drew the roving glances of the spectators up to him. He was puny and insignificant, his costume a throw-out from the clown's wardrobe. Nevertheless he applied himself frantically to his profession, and the faint cries that escaped now and then from his lips were hot and violent like those of an untamed animal. . . .

This boy—who had strayed into Richardson's temple of art like a lion cub that had lost its way—was I. My big, black eyes burnt like torches and my black curly hair fluttered in the wind. An Italian? a gipsy? asked the flaxen-haired Britons at my feet, and enjoyed the outlandishness of the little imp with stolid amazement.

"Just walk in, ladies and gentlemen," rumbled Richardson's bass. His face was red from the heat of the day and his eyes congested and bloodshot.

The fair roared about the ears of the villagers. The fiddling and piping floated on the dark flood of lesser noises like whipped-up foam. Jealously rose and fell the swings in the neighbourhood of Richardson's show. Quack-doctors enviously strained every nerve to attract attention. Abnormal beings boasted loudly of their real or assumed monstrosities. But the majority of the spectators stamped their feet impatiently on the steps of Richardson's booth, afraid of missing the beginning of the show.

The outstanding event of the year was Bartholomew Fair at Smithfield. Proprietors of booths streamed into town from all parts, bringing with them in carts and caravans gay buntings and brightly coloured hoardings to transform the dirty, evil-smelling suburb of London into fairyland. Cloths, stuffs, leather, pewter and cattle were loudly extolled by crafty hucksters. Ballad-singers drew seamstresses, milliners and cooks with their songs of horror. Pickpockets and confidence men reaped a good harvest. But the majority of the gaping crowd thronged into the booths of the bare-backed riders, guffawed at the clowns with their blatant jokes, the knife-swallowers and tightrope-walkers coming in for a good measure of cheering as well.

Bartholomew Fair was my field. I felt thoroughly at home in this medley of noise and smell. I well knew the damp and filthy corners, the dirt-infested hovels, the grotesque, poverty-stricken types which peopled the inns or loitered about. But when the trumpets blared to announce that the performance in Richardson's temple of the muses was due to commence my heart beat violently and my cheeks flushed with excitement.

Here were not the same spectators as in Drury Lane and Covent Garden, not the fine ladies and gentlemen whose carriages blocked the narrow streets, only lowly folk that revelled in the pleasures of a fair-ground. Hucksters, fish-wives, carters, coal-heavers, chimney-sweepers and soldiers sat closely packed on hard wooden benches, still smelling of the trade they followed. Even so Richardson donned the best London frock-coat in his wardrobe in honour of his patrons; and the placards outside the highly coloured

"wooden walls" which were there to allure a most honoured public were never tired of promising great wonders, unsuitable fare for people of such humble rank:

*"A Change of Performances Each Day,
Richardson's Theatre:*

"Mr. Richardson has the honour to inform the Public that for the extraordinary Patronage he has experienced, it has been his great object to contribute to the convenience and gratification of his audience. Mr. Richardson has a splendid collection of Scenery, unrivalled in any Theatre; and, as they are painted and designed by the first Artists in England, he hopes with such Decorations and a Change of Performances each day, the Public will continue him that Patronage it has been his greatest pride to deserve."

Oh yes! Smithfield's public was loyal to this theatre-man and thought well of him. *Monk and Murderer*, followed by the pantomime *Mirth and Magic! or a Trip to Gibraltar* were right after the heart of the enraptured crowd.

Since the days of Ben Jonson's play *Bartholomew Fair* little has changed at that Fair. If Garrick still lived he would perhaps push his way as one of the spectators to this booth-theatre; and it would be conceivable for Richardson, as once one of his predecessors did, to refuse the proffered sixpence as a sign of honour to the great actor with these words: "We never take money of one another!"

I was proud to belong to this profession and my ambition sunned itself in the favour of the public who applauded the accomplishments of "Master Carey"; accomplishments which would have made me feel superior to the spectators had not the galling thought of being the lowliest in Richardson's troupe caused me deep humiliation.

Richardson was nibbling at a ham-joint and enjoying his stone ginger. The cash-result of the day had been gratifying. He belched, feeling very comfortable, and picked the remnants of his meal from his teeth with a penknife. At that moment I stepped in front of him—black and thin, a real little demon.

"Sir, Madam says you are pleased with my work. Won't you give me some pay now?"

Richardson's good humour evaporated in an instant. Another belch, then: "Madam better look after her pots and pans. Are you not already eating me out of house and home? Pay! A nipper, three foot high, pay indeed!"

"Ten shillings a week, sir."

"In my time, it was the custom for a nipper like you to get ten strokes with the cat, that is, if he did good work. Who are you? What do you know of life, tell me? The titbits you eat at my table! Do you think for one moment that anybody would even pay sixpence for you?"

At these coarse, blunt words I kept as still as an animal does during a thunderstorm. But my eyes bored into the fat Richardson. I swallowed the curses which I already knew by heart from my grown-up colleagues, turned on my heel and the same night ran away from this hard-hearted master.

Life at Saunders' Circus was gayer. True, if my work was not satisfactory, my slender calves soon felt the lash of the whip; nevertheless, I learned rope-dancing, trapeze-work, acrobatics and riding like the devil.

Horse-riders were favourite performers. Astley used to attend with his "learned horse". Saunders' Circus could boast of a band which fired jockeys, horses, even the public with its stormy rhythm.

It was at that time that I gave myself up, body and soul, to the equestrian art, a consuming passion, which was to remain with me for ever. I was soon to realize as well that what seems the easiest is ever the most difficult, and that I had to work hard, if I wanted to achieve proficiency.

"Unless I have the whole world at my feet, it is of no use," said I to myself, precociously, jumping on the bare-backed horse as it galloped past.

If I was not made up, with plumes on my head and bells round my neck I felt right out of my element. The gaudy trappings of the circus which I donned, and the applause of human hands spurred me on to attempt more than I could.

Thus, one day—Bartholomew Fair had come round again—I took too daring a jump on the high tight-rope, higher than usual, slipped, fell and broke both my legs.

"Nobody will ever marvel at Master Carey now," I sighed on my sick-bed, far removed from the din and music of the fair. But as soon as I could make my first attempt at walking again, one leg supported by an iron still, a longing and ambition to be in the

artificial splendour of the dream-world once more consumed me. I decided, once for all, to become an actor and from the stage fill people with wonder.

And so Edmund Carey became Edmund Kean.

CHAPTER IV

FIRST ATTEMPTS AT WALKING

I STILL was limping on crutches when my first outing led me behind the scenes at Drury Lane.

Oh, familiar smell of paint and backcloth! The actors stood in the dim morning light among the shadows of high scenery, under the faint illumination of a chandelier, and rehearsed a Shakespearean play with clashing swords and glittering armour. A tragic atmosphere pervaded the place. The battle was in full swing and the boards were strewn with corpses.

With burning cheeks and flaming glances I pushed myself forward into the first wing, and when driven away, because I blocked the entrance to the actors, I soon found refuge in the second wing. My lips repeated in awe the words which the hero rolled out into the empty auditorium. My heart throbbed and my hands clutched each other convulsively in ecstasy.

Day by day, night after night, I haunted Drury Lane. I thought I would die, if I was not to hear the rhythm of the iambics, the cry of the traitor, the last groan of the fallen. In the green-room I became intoxicated with the tirades of the actors, who, in the costumes of Iago, Tubal or Gloster, revelled in their successes with the public and press, over a glass of hot toddy and a game of dice. I returned to the theatre, my rightful home, as I felt, like a stray dog to its kennel. Eventually the actors began to regard me as their talisman, and could hardly be persuaded to perform if I were not there.

I was friendly to everybody and everybody reciprocated my feelings in his own way. The great Incledon taught me how to sing, D'Egville introduced me to the art of dancing. With the fencing master Angelo I learned the exalted art of swordsmanship.

When I was perfectly fit again, I felt the hour had struck to put all this knowledge to use. At the same time I realized that rather than London the provinces would prove the better training ground for the actor.

I had passed my sixteenth year when I joined a troupe of strolling players. Work, suffering, privations and triumphs alternately darkened and brightened my horizon.

There are boys of sixteen who attain to maturity in the cultured

circle of family life, guided by parents and tutors. They model their lives on the dignified bearing of their elders, and without noticing it, grow up in the conventions of that society of which one day they themselves will become respected members.

But there are also boys of the same age who grow up like weeds in the field, who never have the opportunity of enjoying parental guidance. As if they had been born grown up, they have to associate with men and women who behave before them without reticence or modesty. They must renounce everything that childhood holds of loveliness and innocence.

I myself belonged to that second category. I had to grope my way through undergrowth and wilderness. The memory of my father overshadowed my life as a staggering weakling clinging to the ale-house bar and finding consolation in drink. The restlessness of that vagabond woman, Nance Carey, had robbed me of a mother's care for her growing child, and neither Aunt Tid nor Mrs. Clarke had fully compensated me for this vital loss. In the actors' dressing-rooms, where I spent a considerable part of my childhood, nobody ever troubled to preserve in my quivering childish heart those illusions that make childhood a time of joy, purity and enchantment. My fare was recital of scandals which helped considerably to strip me of the last remnants of innocence.

At sixteen I knew more of the world than many a man at thirty. No wonder that I ached to play parts on the stage which were far too advanced for my age.

For four long years the wind of fate drove me from east to west, from south to north. They were years of bitter apprenticeship and wanderings, full of hopes, disillusion, hunger and deprivations. We poor unfortunates worked mostly for equal pay, but alas! as often as not there was nothing to share out after we had played before an empty house. Hunger was then the task-master and hope a pale shadow to buoy us up. However, when youth was your privilege and a life of freedom, adventure and comradeship lay before you, what mattered hunger and low spirits?

Of one thing I am certain, when looking back on my life: I did the right thing in becoming an actor, because fate had ordained it. I who wanted to blaze the trail to heaven in my youthful impetuosity and ardour, as I did in my turbulent years; I who was consumed in my own fire, as it happened, I was, so to speak, the sacred flame itself, and my God-given mission was to make it shine throughout the world.

When I stood on the stage and acted, I felt no hunger. I was a



THEATRE ROYAL, DRURY LANE
Drawn by Thomas H. Shepherd



OLYMPIC THEATRE, WYCH STREET
Drawn by Thomas H. Shepherd

THEATRE ROYAL, DRURY-LANE. (110)

This present WEDNESDAY, January 26, 1814,

Their Majesties' Servants will perform SHAKESPEARE'S Play of the

MERCHANT OF VENICE.

Duke of Venice, Mr R PHILLIPS,

Antonio, Mr. POWELL,

Bassanio, Mr. R A E,

Salanio, Mr. I WALLACK, Salarino, Mr CROOKE,

Gratiano Mr. WRENCH,

Lorenzo, Mr PHILIPPS.

With the Songs "Go I see my Gentle Jess," (composed by Dr ARNE)
and "Softly rise O southern breeze," (by Dr BOYCE)

Shylock, Mr KEAN, from the Theatre Royal, Exeter,

(His First Appearance at this Theatre.)

Lancelot, Mr O X B E R R Y,

Tubal, Mr MADDOCKS, Balthazar, Mr. BUXTON,

Gobbo, Mr. WEWITZER

Portia, Miss SMITH,

Nerissa, Mrs. H A R L O W E,

Jessica, Mrs B L A N D,

With the Song "Haste Lorenzo" (composed by Dr ARNE)

In Act III A Duett, by Mrs B L A N D, and Mr. PHILIPPS.

(Composed by Mr SHAW)

After which will be revived (First Time these Nine Years,) MURPHY'S Farce of the

APPRENTICE.

Wingate, Mr G A T T I E,

Dick, Mr B A N N I S I L R,

Gargle, Mr P E N S O N,

Simon, Mr O X B L R R Y,

Fishman, Mr F I S H L R, Scotchman, Mr CARR,

Porter Mr BUXTON, Watchman, Mr CHAFFERLEY,

Spoilers, Messrs LYANS, I W L S T, APPLBY, &c.

Charlotte, Mrs. O R G E R.

VIVANT REY ET REGINA. NO MONEY TO BE RETURNED [Lowndes and Hbbe, Marquis Court, London.]

To MORROW (10th Time,) the favourite New Opera of NARENSKY, with (26th Time,) the Grand Oriental Spectacle of

ILLUSION:

Or, the TRANCES OF NOURJAHAD,

On Friday, CIBBER'S Comedy of SHE WOU'D AND SHE WOU'D NOT, with,
(26th Time,) the popular Pantomime of HARLEQUIN HARPER

On Saturday, The Opera of the DEVIL'S BRIDGE *Count Belino*, Mr BRAHAM 1^o
which will be added, (27th Time,) the Grand Spectacle of ILLUSION, or, the Trances of
Nourjahad

On Monday (First time at this Theatre,) The Comedy of WILD OATS, with (27th time)
HARLEQUIN HARPER

A NEW FARCE

Is in Rehearsal, and will be produced immediately.

The Comic Opera of the SIEGE OF BELGRAD, and the Musical Farce of
JOHN IN A CAMP, or, Patrick in Prussia, are in preparation, and will shortly be revived

PLAYBILL OF THE FIRST APPEARANCE OF KEAN
AT DRURY LANE, 26TH JANUARY, 1814

born gipsy; abandonment meant more to me than anything else. Poverty held no terror for me. I had looked upon it as something natural since my childhood days. Life on the road, this coming and going to and from the fairs lent wings to my fancy and gilded with romantic splendour what appears to the eyes of the ordinary middle-class person as nothing more than vagabondism and low trickery. To me there was nothing degrading in the fact that country and provincial people thought us mummers a loose immoral lot, only to be dismissed as gipsies and tramps, when we invaded their commune.

Let them exult in their stupid pride! As evening draws on, and they take their seats on the precarious planks in front of the glittering footlights, they forget their superiority. And when we appear—kings now, conspirators, magicians, robbers—they tremble in awe of us and become humble, realizing hazily a feeling of dependence and inferiority.

We wrap the mantle of magic about our shoulders and stand as gods in a cloud of light and dust before their dazzled eyes.

When I acted on the stage—or on the scanty planks that were called a stage—in a village inn or a barn, near a manure heap, or in an atmosphere of an obviously pungent stable smell, there existed for me at that moment only one element that made me soar like a bird in the air; it was the passionate desire to act. I knew no distinction between the pathos of profound tragedy and the capers of a clown.

I was spared the misery of realizing all that this life meant, a life of pretence, of borrowed splendour and moral degradation (now, as I painfully view it in retrospect, I am shocked to the marrow). With unshakable earnestness I believed in what I pretended to be; with infinite fervour I was set alight, when they gave the signal for the start of the show. In my keenness a somersault was as exhilarating to me as the rolling monologue of a Shakespearean hero.

When I had turned twenty, Fate—aided somewhat by Aunt Tid—landed me in London. At the Haymarket Theatre a kind of summer season was on. I was engaged to act in small parts for the princely sum of two pounds a week. This glory lasted from June to September. Nobody noticed the slender, insignificant and poorly clad youth who, when Rae played Hamlet, was his Rosen-crantz. I disappeared unobtrusively to try my luck in the provinces once more.

CHAPTER V

HAMLET GETS MARRIED

CAN you appreciate the insatiable urge for work felt by the actor as he stands on the stage in the bright footlights fired by the applause of an almost invisible audience? Life only begins for him at that moment. And can you measure what it means to be obliged to watch others play themselves into favour with the public, whilst the beginner is forced to stand aside and fret like a circus-horse champing on the bit?

To be young brings with it the cultivation of self-abnegation and courage. To be young and a member of a troupe of players means to drain to the dregs the bitter cup of suffering handed to him by complacently smiling colleagues. The ardent young player eager to display himself suffers a dagger thrust, when he is relegated merely to announce "The horses are saddled"; to feed his more fortunate rival with cues is unspeakable torment to the small-part player.

If you want to get on in your career and want to attract the attention of all, from call-boy to manager, do not bear yourself with modesty; do not sit about in the ante-rooms of managers and producers, do not count on the benevolence of the principal or on the sudden illness of a fellow-actor. Only a ruthless determination is effective in bringing prospects of success. Only an unscrupulous inflexibility of purpose can remove the obstacles towering like unscalable mountains before the eyes of the unhappy artist.

With a greed, characteristic only of actors, I fought like a young animal to get all the parts for myself that youthful ambition could desire, and I devoured with avidity as many as my brain could digest.

I played tragedy, comedy; I played in the mime, which rounded off the show. I did not mind even coming before the curtain during the waits to act as comic singer and reciter or jumping with daring through a burning hoop.

Daylight hours I filled with the study of Shakespeare and the study of Latin and Greek. I became an adept in fencing and amused the public by my skilful dancing. But I felt and knew instinctively that my strength lay in tragedy. I was determined to achieve the highest perfection in it, lest my life remained without aim or meaning.

In Birmingham I played Hamlet for the first time. Out of the chaos of farces, harlequinades, fencing feats and fair-shows rose the giant Shakespeare and with him my youthful enthusiasm fired by the ringing make-believe and the magic mastery of art in all its forms.

I forgot the world round me, forgot the trivialities of every-day life and was only the brooding Prince of Denmark who reluctantly, but inevitably, assumes the role of avenger. So completely did I shed my own identity that I forgot to eat and drink and, like a sleepwalker, staggered along, till the footlights and the applause of the audience roused me from my dream existence.

Like a star rose my fame over the counties of Gloucester, Warwick and Hertfordshire. As far as Scotland went the tour of the wandering player. The troupes to which I belonged were not always the same, but these raffish mummers ever resembled each other with their lined faces, the motley array of their ragged clothes, and a display of arrogant genius which lifted even the most humble of comedians above the smug, self-satisfied man in the street.

Among these absurd and pitiful forms through which the wind of the open road whistled as if through scarecrows, I stood apart, peculiarly elated and goaded on, as it were, by an inner voice. The vigour and freshness of early youth radiated from me and lent to my acting the mysterious splendour of things to come, of something incomplete yet full of promise and unique.

My spectators were simple folk: farmers, tradespeople and artisans of provincial towns and villages. They did not boast the arrogance of the London playgoer and critic; theirs was the gift of naïve enjoyment, theirs the capacity of being deeply stirred by the human foibles of the characters portrayed. This meant a personal triumph, and I revelled in it, freely accepting it as my right, as only youth can.

After having travelled in Scotland, I passed over to Belfast, where Atkins engaged me to play leading parts. And Belfast became the witness of my tragi-comic encounter with Mrs. Sarah Siddons, the great sister of John Philip Kemble. The Queen of Tragedy at that time, having already reached the age of fifty, was at the zenith of her fame; she toyed with the idea of retiring from the stage to spend her life in contemplation in the picturesque little house on the healthy heights of Hampstead Heath. In the meantime, however, it pleased her greatly to say farewell to the people of Great Britain—a farewell which lasted for some years

and which included a good many tours through all parts of the United Kingdom.

Her first appearance in Belfast was as Zara in William Congreve's *The Mourning Bride*. Fate, or better its representative Atkins, had condemned me to be cast in the part of Osmyn, a character totally unsuited to me. It is true, I fought against playing it, but as Atkins insisted on our contract I had to make the best of it and swallow the uncongenial text within an incredibly short time. My aversion to the part, the very short period of rehearsals, and finally my resolve to seek courage in the cup were responsible for the utter failure of acquitting myself adequately in the presence of the great tragedienne. I lost the thread and although I hardly moved away from the prompter's wing I declaimed confused sentences in place of the given words and naturally aroused the intense displeasure, not only of Mrs. Siddons, but of the public as well. So great was my failure that I felt impelled to step in front of the curtain and ask forgiveness from an indulgent audience. Embarrassed and painfully stammering I tried to explain that too little time for preparation was at fault. Besides, how could I consider myself worthy of standing up to such an exquisite artist as Mrs. Siddons?

A glance from the indignant lioness told me that the compliment had reconciled her to my shortcoming. When, however, on the following day Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserv'd* was to be rehearsed, she cautiously inquired of the manager who was to play the part of Jaffier.

Somewhat timidly Atkins replied, "Mr. Kean".

"What!" said she, indignantly, "surely not that horrid little man who destroyed the tragedy last night?"

Atkins melted before her piercing glance like snow in the spring sun, assuring her, however, that she might fear nothing from the beginner in that part.

Fortunately his assertion proved right; for not only did I please the audience, but found favour in the eyes of the Queen of Tragedy, who complimented me with the words, "You have played very well, sir, very well. I have never heard that part given in the same way before."

At that point I should like to recall another experience, firmly rooted in my memory although lenient time has spread his mantle of forgetfulness over many a fatal and perplexing happening.

I am fully aware that I am not favoured with the stature of a hero, yet it was precisely in heroic parts that I was able to force my audience to unbounded admiration. It can easily be under-

stood that the impetuous youth was still lacking the moderation and presence of mind of a mature man, which would have enabled him to counter a remark of this kind with silent pride.

It occurred in Samuel Jerrold's company, during my appearance in Sheerness, opening in *Alexander the Great*. An officer in one of the stage boxes annoyed me by exclaiming—"Alexander the Great? By Jove, he should be called Alexander the Little!"

Some people in the audience laughed, others remained silent from embarrassment. I, however, interrupted my play, folded my arms, approached the intruder, and with a penetrating look which silenced the arrogant spectator, flung him the words: "Yes, sir—Alexander the Little—but with a great soul!"

The spontaneous applause was evidence that the public was on my side.

I should like to draw attention to the fact that alongside the actor Edmund Kean lived the man Edmund Kean. His was a dual personality in which two forces alternated between perfect harmony and violent antagonism.

The true actor, in his fanaticism, suffers from the tragic conflict between art and human nature. The latter feeds his art as the fuel feeds the fire. But the artist, who is only himself in his eternal changes, is obsessed by the immutability of the material world, which he regards as irksome, weighing him down from his flight into the world of fancy.

As far as I was concerned the world outside the theatre was an evil to be endured, because it was in my view of minor importance, compared with my real life on the stage.

Was it, thus, love that drove me into the arms of Mary Chambers, or only a careless desire to imitate my fellow-workers, or perhaps to relieve the emptiness of every-day life?

To-day I know what Mary meant to me as well as I know that artistic accomplishment does not bring with it the instinct for judging human nature—or better—for judging women. Numerous women crossed my path. As I stand now at the end of my journey, I have to admit I have never known what sacred and profane love meant. A man's sensual ardour is a flame that blinds his eyes. I often chose unwisely and rashly. I always had to pay for my rashness. I was the average man who is ever the prey of woman—and perhaps, who knows, food for her laughter. I cannot tell, but this I know, the punishment outweighed any crime a hundred-fold.

Mary Chambers had been a governess, before she took up stage

life. She had come to England in the family of a Mr. and Mrs. Congreve, of Mount Congreve, near Waterford, and had then gone stage-struck. When she met me, I was twenty-one years old, she twenty-nine. I revelled in the youthful extravagance of my power, conscious of victory. She gave shelter to the love which had come into her life. Fate had brought her little in the way of happiness, but she made the most of it and cherished it. I was the rushing, foaming mountain-stream; she the quiet bridge that safely led across it.

She met me with motherly tenderness which I had been deprived of to my cost in my early childhood. In face of this, it did not matter that she was of a pale and colourless beauty. The first signs of fading youth gave her a look of patient suffering.

We were married in July 1808. I could breathe freely, confessing to myself: Now I can devote myself entirely to my art and leave all trivial matters to Mary!

It was a real mummer's wedding, such as only strolling players know. The box-office takings, as it was the hot summer season, were in every respect unsatisfactory; the results, when shared out, were pitiful. In order to pay at least the marriage fees I saw myself obliged to borrow half a guinea, which I did in an eloquent display of words. After the ceremony the bridal couple and witnesses, with real mummers' exuberance, invaded "The Dog", a local tavern—where the landlady knew how to humour them—and celebrated the festive event "on credit".

What a wedding! Though clothes were in holes, the seams of their coats shiny from old age, words of bombastic warmth fell from their lips, each sentence a quotation from Shakespeare. The movements of their limbs under miserable rags savoured now of the dignity of a tragedian and now of the antics of a clown. Sir John Falstaff would have enjoyed these amusing companions who moved about in this dark hole of an inn, as if they were in company with Mistress Quickly and Doll Tearsheet.

A guitar rang, a voice sang:

*Do nothing but eat, and make good cheer,
And praise heaven for the merry year;
When flesh is cheap, and females dear,
And lusty lads roam here and there,
So merrily,
And ever among so merrily.*

Loud laughter echoed from the walls; glasses clinked. Not one among us was loath to hide his light under a bushel. They seemed

to be performing in a wedding and a beggar's banquet as well. They were players and applauding audience in one. And among them moved Edmund Kean and Mary Chambers, now called Mary Kean.

The plain deal table at which we both sat was transformed into a king's festive board. With invisible crown, invisible purple robe, I sat enthroned, my fair consort at my side. I raised the tankard of cheap beer to my lips with noble gesture as if it brimmed over with ruby wine.

Was there a miserable oil-lamp smoking above the table? Or did a royal chandelier shed its radiance over our feast? "Silence for Edmund Kean!" I sang, and the whitewashed walls vanished in darkness; I recited, and the vast world of kings and heroes arose before our eyes.

My guests, at peace with the world, rolled happily under table and bench. I, however, put my arms round Mary's shoulders and felt pride in the thought of being a legitimate husband and not a dissolute outsider like my own father. . . .

"If we ever have children, Mary," I laughed, "they may call us father and mother without blushing. Forsooth! I never expected that bourgeois smugness could bring so much bliss!"

My companions, men and women, of whom only few had sought and received the sanction of the church, thoughtlessly cheered my sentiments with noisy laughter.

Mary drew me close to her, as a mother does her big boy, and stroked my black curly head, dreamily saying: "We will be very happy with each other."

CHAPTER VI

YEARS OF WANDERING

THE marriage was not to be a happy one.

I felt it, when I caught myself wishing for the companionship of dissolute drinkers.

Once again I tell you: I was a flame consuming itself. If I were not performing on the stage, I fancied, I was hanging over a bottomless pit. A feeling of utter loneliness, of being at the mercy of fate, tormented me and could only be stifled in drink.

I was not at all fastidious in choosing my companions; the wilder they were, the more flagrantly they bore themselves in the drinking-houses where I met them, the more readily I accepted their comradeship. I felt as if I yielded to the outstretched hands of evil spirits who led me to the haunts of the underworld.

As a member of Watson's troupe I was earning now one pound a week. An offer by another manager, Cherry, a Limerick man, promising me five shillings more made me break my contract with Watson. But Cherry was travelling in South Wales. This meant going there to begin my new engagement. How was it possible to make this long journey from Birmingham to Swansea without any ready money and with old debts waiting to be paid?

"We'll travel by special coach, Mary!" I cried ironically, banging my fist on the table. "Lord Adolphus FitzClarence has seen me as Othello. And in appreciation of my epoch-making acting he is generously putting his carriage at my disposal!"

I groaned. . . .

"What a world! One plays kings and heroes, but as soon as one leaves the footlights, one has to mend the holes in the kingly stockings and is allowed to go begging heroically for a slice of bacon. Was I born to ask merchants and artisans for alms? Is my light still shining, or am I a sooty flame destined to be snuffed out?"

Mary soothed my outbursts of sudden anger in her pale and suffering way. She knew the life of a player was bitter through and through. One had to starve, fight one's whole life through merely in order to become night after night mock-king or conspirator amidst ill-lit and scanty scenery.

We started our journey to Swansea on foot. The weather was grey and dull, a damp, unfriendly autumn day with fog and rain.

A hundred and eighty miles lay in front of us. I groaned under the burden of a bundle of clothes and in my weariness I used stage-swords which were my own property as a staff to support me. Mary was now with child. We tramped along for days on end. In order to secure a roof over our heads and food for our starving bodies, I sang and recited in village inns. Country folk, cattle dealers and toll collectors listened with grinning mistrust to scenes out of *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Richard III*. Not until I performed my capers and danced on my hands through the inn parlour did their mood become less hostile. It was then that the lean comedian was permitted to drink from their tankards, that the poor worn-out woman who sat shivering in the chimney-corner was given food and drink. Thus we begged our way along, reaching at last our destination, the place where Cherry stayed.

There comes a time, when even the most optimistic of strolling players owns that he is fagged out, dogged by ill-fate, weakened by distress and trouble, disappointed in applause and pay, and that no earthly power can drag him from the morass of the disorderly life into which he has plunged.

When in hours of contemplation I looked back at the result of my years of wandering, I had to confess that glory and stark reality were two different things. I had hoped, when I married Mary Chambers, that she would guard me from the worries of everyday life and enable me to reign and breathe freely in the realms of art. Every day I learnt instead the bitter facts of poverty and exhaustion.

Mary gave birth to a boy. We called him Howard. A second boy, Charles, soon followed. We were now a family, chained to each other for better or worse. The hungry mouths cried out for bread. To empty benches, however, I played Macbeth and Richard III, despot and ruler, as long as the footlights shone on me; a hunted, worried family man the minute I threw my wig in the corner and wiped the grease-paint off my face.

The Hamlet, Othello and Romeo of enchanted nights had in the pale light of day no end of trouble in convincing suspicious citizens of the dire necessity for a loan, however small. At York we were in such straits that I thought seriously of enlisting as a soldier. Debts weighed me down like heavy chains, and hard creditors and crafty usurers haunted my sleeping hours like evil spirits.

To my disordered imagination the ordinary citizen appeared like a fantastic monster. Eventually I saw him only as a fat immobile sack of money, as the unapproachable plutocrat with

broad forehead, square jaw and little eyes peering out maliciously from under pallid brows. Always I stood before him in stooping humility, with bowed forehead and hands uplifted in supplication. My starving wife and children waited at home for the result of my pleading. Distress stood behind me with raised whip.

Life, oh life! It is hard to beg when you feel as if you would like to hit your haughty creditor in the face. But who was I to dare, even in my dreams, to challenge wealth and comfort?

Miserable play-actors! No sooner did they arrive at a little town or village, when folk snatched their washing from the clothes-line and locked up their chickens; when clergy thundered from the pulpit against the glamour and immorality of the stage, that invention of the devil.

Our food, if any, was served on tin plates. Sometimes, wandering from town to town, we lived on turnips stolen from the fields we passed by. Only in drink was there salvation, an illusory vision of a better life.

In Swansea I met Thomas Colley Grattan; little did I guess then, that, in later years, he was to become my staunchest and most warm-hearted of friends.

Grattan at that time was an officer in the army and stationed in Swansea. He came along with other officers to see the performance of *Hamlet*. The tragedy of the Danish prince seemed to arouse little or no sympathy in the young theatre-goers; in their light-heartedness they would have preferred most likely a good farce instead. They were just about to leave the theatre, when the fencing scene between Hamlet and Laertes excited their interest as experts.

The actor who played Laertes happened to be a particularly tall, thin man. The fight between him and the somewhat puny Hamlet—my height was only 5 ft. 5 in.—could scarcely have lacked an element of the grotesque.

Consequently Grattan called out from his stage box laughing, "Hold, enough!" but my fine, deft fencing betraying the exquisite schooling of Master Angelo, soon silenced and absorbed him. Obviously, he perceived in the Hamlet a quiet gracefulness of manner, while he parried the cut-and-thrust attacks of his antagonist. When I began to return the lunges "*secundem artem*", and thrust the contres, first *contre carte* and then *contre tierce*, the officers were quite taken by surprise to see the carriage and action of a practised swordsman.

After that performance Grattan sought me out. He was full of

praise and admiration for my fine swordsmanship and begged me to teach him fencing.

I fell in with his suggestion, and in the course of our subsequent meetings I learnt to respect him as a straight and genuine fellow. I, the humble provincial player, felt proud of and honoured by his friendship.

But soon, having to leave Swansea, we parted company. I shall have opportunity, however, in the course of this story, to say more about Grattan, the man and friend.

In Mary's home-town, Waterford, the manager was willing to arrange a benefit performance for me and my wife. The townsfolk, full of curiosity, crowded into the theatre eager to see the former governess on the stage. On that night I acted a tragedian; I danced on the tightrope; I fought a match against a professional boxer, and at the end was seen as a dying chimpanzee in the pantomime by La Pérouse. I suffered agony over this dull farce and clowning. My soul rebelled when my lowest tricks were greeted with far more applause than my performance in tragedy. Mary with her weary smile soothed as she always did. Our share amounted to £40, a fortune to us, for which I would willingly at one time have sold my soul.

And yet, when here and there the inhabitants of a little town, a port or industrial centre were carried away by the fervour of my acting, when the ramshackle walls resounded to the applause and cheering of the excited crowd, it was then I felt with unerring instinct that I was made of the stuff to hold a world enthralled at my feet.

Fierce pride welled up in me at these moments, I scorned fate that had condemned me to a life of obscurity; a poor devil forced to pander to the lowest instincts of the masses, night after night jesting in harlequinades and pantomimes.

"What would you, Kean?" sighed the bloated, gloomy manager after such nights of triumph. "The crowd is raving. Their applause is the actor's most cherished reward. Do you suppose in London the enthusiasm could be greater? You are a lucky dog to have found your way to me."

I turned pale with anger beneath my make-up. I knew too well that it was to see me the people crowded into the theatre, that the manager could go a-begging if he did not employ me as his tragic hero. In a sudden fit of despair these words burst from me: "Ten shillings a week more, sir, or this is the last time I shall act for you!"

The manager stiffened visibly. His eyes narrowed and blinked, his voice was cold and distant: "If Mr. Kean intends to play with fate, thank you; Mr. Kean can look out for another engagement."

The manager's words struck me like a thunderbolt. In blind anger I shouted: "Hundreds of producers are clamouring for me. You'll hear from me, sir!"—I tore off the tawdry finery I was wearing and left the nonplussed man to himself.

The time was not at all favourable for a good new engagement. Nobody was clamouring for me. My small family sat about in a chilly room and lived as well as it could on credit. The ghost of starvation hovered over us. I wrote petitions till my fingers ached, but, alas, the result was always crushing.

"I challenged fate," I lamented. "I always shall challenge it," I cried with intolerance. "Am I a bungler who only deserves poverty? Or am I to fulfil a mission to a listening world?"

The life of the Corsican conqueror who about this time made all Europe tremble leapt to my mind. If it was possible for a Napoleon to subjugate a whole continent, why not for me as well? I was entitled to emerge from my darkness and soar on high like the little corporal, soar on high and fill the world with the radiance of my art.

Give me time, only time! Earth will resound with tumultuous applause from thousands of enthusiasts.

Thinking thus, I paused. I groped for Mary's hand and whispered: "Mary, if I succeed, I shall go mad."

CHAPTER VII

ON THE SWINGS

UP and down! up and down! Life is like a swing to a strolling player, carrying him from exultation to despondency.

It was a stroke of luck when on our wanderings from town to town, once in a while, the children and bundles of clothes secured some room on a passing waggon, and when we also were allowed to scramble on to it between sacks of corn and bleating sheep. But when on sleety, icebound roads the axle broke, and we, with the children in our arms, had to trudge on through storm and icy weather, almost at the end of our strength, with no will to live, I felt the bitterness of disgrace and suffering. I felt over me the malicious ruling of an invisible power which used man as a worthless pawn.

A mummer's lot! No sooner were the stage lamps lit, and the hall filled up with people, the signal given for ringing up the curtain, the player, paper crown on head, mock ermine around his shoulders, seen emerging from behind the scenes, than all heartache and woe which lay between the performances vanished into thin air. The enchanted fields of Thalia opened up before the artist, the fire of the audience carrying him aloft to Olympic realms.

A contract that I concluded with Hughes, the manager, took me to the Channel Island, Guernsey. There I saw scenery and met with people in many ways different from those of my own country. The haunts of old-time smugglers and freebooters had lost nothing of romance. In the steep streets of St. Peter Port and in the old harbour inns I studied the types who as audience applauded me at night.

True, the local critic was not my peculiar cup of tea. When I acted Hamlet I could read in the small Guernsey paper:

"Last night a young man whose name the bills said was Kean made his first appearance as Hamlet, and truly his performance of the character made us wish that we had been indulged with the country system of excluding it, and playing all the other characters. This person has, we understand, a high character in several parts of England, and his vanity has repeatedly prompted him to endeavour to procure an engagement at one of the theatres in the metropolis; the difficulties he has met with have,

however, proved insurmountable, and the managers of Drury Lane and Covent Garden have saved themselves the disgrace to which they would be subject by countenancing such impudence and incompetency. Even his performance of the inferior characters of the drama would be objectionable, if there was nothing to render him ridiculous but one of the vilest figures that has been seen either on or off the stage; and if his mind was half so qualified for the representation of Richard III, which he is shortly to appear in, as his person is suited to the deformities with which the tyrant is supposed to have been distinguished from his fellows, his success would be most unequivocal. As to his Hamlet, it is one of the most terrible misrepresentations to which Shakespeare has ever been subjected. Without grace or dignity he comes forward; he shows an unconsciousness that anybody is before him, and is often so forgetful of the respect due to an audience that he turns his back upon them in some of those scenes in which contemplation is to be indulged, as if for the purpose of showing his abstractedness from all ordinary subjects. His voice is harsh and monotonous, but as it is deep, answers well enough the idea he entertains of impressing terror by a tone which seems to proceed from a charnel house."

I cannot deny that I felt a most intense urge to strangle the fellow. But I struggled to control myself—or was there something in the enchanting climate of the Channel Islands to account for such moderation?—and put up with it as belonging to a romantic idyll, enhanced by a great discovery, which I communicated to Mary with grim humour: "My dear Mary, what do you think? I can get brandy here for one and six a bottle. I can drink it instead of beer."

If this idyll came to an abrupt end, I must admit, I was mainly to blame for the conclusion of the theatre season. The real reason for it was this:

The officers of the garrison had asked for a performance of *The Royal Oak*. Hughes offered me the part of Charles I; as I, however, did not like either the play or the part, I simply refused to appear on that night. Hughes, knowing the moods of his artists, was not to be so easily put off; he insisted that I was under contract to play any part and announced the performance.

I cannot tell whether my youthful insolence or the brandy at 1s. 6d. a bottle was to blame for my continued resistance. I sent a note to Hughes on the day of the performance which said that King Charles had been beheaded on his way to the theatre and therefore it was impossible for him to appear.

The public—my good sailor-friends and the toll-gatherers, tradespeople, soldiers, and in the boxes the officers of the garrison—began to whistle, and to relieve their feelings at the delay of the performance used bad language. When Hughes found himself obliged to read the part I should have played, he stepped before the curtain and announced that “Mr. Kean’s medical advisers” had told him to relinquish the part on account of bad health.

The audience very likely would have been gulled by this explanation, and the play would have reached its end undisturbed, had not the “sick Mr. Kean”, in a mood of devilry, appeared in the audience in order to enjoy the histrionic qualities of his managerial understudy. At any rate, the surprise of the audience was great when Mr. Kean, the invalid himself, showed up in the hall and evinced keen interest in the play whose hero he should have been by right. To the manager, livid with wrath and perspiring over his dramatic effort, he sent encouraging cries of “Well done, my boy” and “Bravo, Hughes!”

If I imagined that through this impudent enjoyment of a colleague’s inferiority I would succeed in amusing the audience I was thoroughly mistaken. These honest folk had caught fire from the fate of Charles I; it was all the same to them whether a good or bad actor stood on the boards; they would not now tolerate a presumptuous actor staging a play in the auditorium and hindering them from undisturbed enjoyment by sarcastic interpolations. As one man they turned against the disturber of the peace who lolled in the back smelling of brandy and even now had not the common sense to give up his improvised part.

They whistled to demand silence. “Throw him over!” advised one of the spectators in a deep voice; and when I began to pick out members of the audience, instead of the manager on the stage, as a target for my jokes, the inevitable happened: I was seized by two constables and led into the open; whereupon the audience could once more enjoy the play in peace.

It was only too natural that my relations with Hughes and my other colleagues should be strained. With great satisfaction the manager withheld my salary for a fortnight. And when in the meantime he received an offer to perform in an English port he left the island at once, abandoning me to my well-deserved fate.

There I sat on Guernsey, a miserable man, unable to leave the island until certain bills were settled. That’s why I gave an entertainment in a poor inn, charging the modest sum of sixpence for admission, in this way realizing a few shillings. When, at length,

I and my family set out again for my own country, it was not on a bedecked pleasure boat but on a dirty cargo-vessel full of evil-smelling hides.

A kindly fate led me to Exeter. Here I played Hamlet, Richard III, Othello, Shylock. That I applied myself to my art with intense devotion was testified by the critics as follows:

"We have scarcely known a performer, in this or any other theatre, who possessed so great a versatility of talent as Mr. Kean; and, when we say this much of him, we would not be understood to mean that he contrives to hobble through tragedy, comedy and pantomime, without exciting pleasure or disgust. No! His performance in either line is superior to almost any actor out of London. Whether he portrays the Jew, or trips it on the light fantastic toe, as Harlequin or the Prince in *Cinderella*, in either character he interests, he delights his audience—he is indeed an universal favourite."

My characterization of Shylock carried my audience away. I did not expose the Venetian Jew, according to tradition, to the ridicule and scorn of a brutal gallery, but showed him as a down-trodden human offering resistance. The newspaper critics took up the case as if it were a town scandal and wrote detailed articles for and against the self-opinionated conception of a young actor without fame or experience to justify his deviation from so sacred a tradition. Nevertheless, my name was on everybody's lips; people flocked to the theatre to see me; they cheered me as soon as I stepped on the stage from where I, with the hypnotic power of a lion-tamer, compelled their attention.

I scored in my triumph over my poverty-stricken fellow-players. When I showed myself in the streets all glances were upon me. Women, old and young, followed in my train. Husbands and guardians alike challenged me and were dealt with sarcastically. In the taverns I was fêted riotously. So much so, that more often than not, it occurred that at night I entered my dressing-room showing obvious signs of drink and was hardly able to finish my part. The demon of darkness, once my father's boon companion, peered over my shoulder with insolent grimaces, and I had not the strength to drive him away.

When one night I did not turn up at all at the performance, because I lay helpless under the table of a tavern of bad repute, I was dismissed without notice as an unreliable actor.

Utter misery: Mary's silent grief and reproaches once again. The weeping of the children. Begging for bread. Wanderings on

unfriendly roads, and the longing for an engagement however humble!

In the autumn of 1813, whilst at Barnstaple, I received a letter from Aunt Tid. It came to us starving people like a message from above. This dear motherly soul had succeeded in securing for the provincial player—which I seemed doomed to remain all my life—an engagement at the Wych Street Theatre in London. The reproaches of my pitiable family were silent and changed into noisy rejoicing. Suffering seemed to be a thing of the past. Forgotten the humiliations of painful years of wandering, forgotten the hunger, the brutality and despair of a sordid life. A generous offer, signed by Robert William Elliston, the director, with the princely salary of three guineas a week.

I hurried on to answer Elliston:

“Sir,

“I have this moment received your proposals for the Wych Street Theatre—*id est*—Little Drury. The terms Miss Tidswell, by your authority, mentioned to me, are the superintending the stage, the whole of the principal line of business under all denomination of acting, and an equal division of the house on the night of my benefit, with three guineas a week for salary. I place so firm a reliance on your reputed liberality, that on the proof of my humble abilities and assiduity towards the promotion of your interests, you will not be unmindful of mine; I accept, sir, your present proposal, simply requesting you will name what time you expect me in London.

E. KEAN.”

A lucky lottery ticket could have brought no greater bliss. Yes, indeed! In December I was to begin my duties. Up till then I could indulge in dreams: all London would cheer me after less than a fortnight, as the counties in the south, north, east and west had done.

I played in Dorchester just before proceeding to London. One night, while making my way to the dingy dressing-room, a little note was handed to me. It came from Samuel Arnold, the producer at Drury Lane, London. He wrote, he had been present at the play, had enjoyed my acting and would deem it an honour to have lunch with me the following day.

Turning the note over in my hand, still pondering over its contents, the thought crossed my mind: “Good heavens, to-night’s acting has been exceptionally bad. And just to-night this Samuel Arnold must come in to see me!”

After a little while, however, it dawned on me that a producer of Drury Lane would hardly send me an invitation to meet him, had he not been favourably impressed.

I replied, accepting Arnold's invitation with thanks.

The following day I found myself seated opposite a well-groomed man about town.

"Dr. Drury, the head master of Harrow, has seen you act at Dorchester and reported well to the Drury Lane committee," said Arnold, and continued weighing up each word carefully. "Your acting, though not free from faults, has impressed me too. I can see possibilities for the future, and I am willing to help you to a better and more adequate sphere of work."

I hardly dared to breathe, but nodded with a smile. "Such is life!" I thought to myself not without bitterness. "Either misery dogs your steps or you are offered two chances to reach Olympus!"

I passed my hand across my forehead as if to wipe out the memory of Robert William Elliston and his theatre in Wych Street.

"You seem moved, Mr. Kean," smiled Arnold. "I understand your emotion. Drury Lane is the dream of all actors. I am offering you an engagement for three years. You will receive for the first year £8 per week, for the second £9 and for the third year £10."

I rose. My left hand tightly gripping the back of my chair, my right one lifted in a pleading gesture.

Arnold nodded contentedly.

"You are going to sign?"

It meant betrayal of Elliston. Who will blame me for it? Who, in my place, would not have refused the smaller offer seeing the first prize in easy reach? I felt the blood rushing through my veins; it sounded like the frantic applause of a crowd gone mad. I dared not think nor hesitate. I grasped his outstretched hand. The contract was completed.

At home I staggered into a seat. No more to be compelled to play before country folk and cattle dealers! No more to act the clown and low comedian! To be free! to be blessed! to be a man! to be an artist!

"But what about your contract with Elliston?" put in Mary timidly.

With an imperious gesture I seized the quill and wrote:

"Sir,

"Since I last wrote to you, I have received a very liberal offer from the proprietors of Drury Lane Theatre. It gives me unspeakable regret that the proposals did not reach me before I had commenced negotiating with you; but I hope, sir, you will

take a high and liberal view of the question, when I beg you to decline the engagement. Another time I shall be happy to treat with you.

“I am, sir, your obedient servant,

EDMUND KEAN.”

After a few days a reply came from Elliston. I crumpled up the letter and threw it on the floor in disgust. Mary picked it up, smoothed it out and read it. Elliston called me a deserter; demanded my services. The sky which only a moment ago seemed radiantly blue darkened visibly.

CHAPTER VIII

FIRST ATTACK ON LONDON

OF one thing I was sure: neither Elliston nor Drury Lane mattered. What was at stake was the conquest of London by Edmund Kean. Was there any sense in pleading before Elliston? I simply would go to London, present myself at Drury Lane and leave the rest to almighty Fate.

I was prepared to challenge Fate but my beginnings were not too bright. When I was about to leave for London my elder son Howard succumbed to an acute fever. My grief was immeasurable. I had loved this boy with all the tender love for a firstborn. But the actor's calling does not allow for private emotions; he has to smile when the part demands it, even though sorrow stabs him with a thousand daggers. The journey to London could not be postponed. The illness and death of my boy had stripped me of my last penny. In Director Lee, the proprietor of the Dorchester Theatre, I found a sympathetic friend who, in view of my London prospects, gave me a loan of £5, and thus made my journey to London possible. Mary and the younger boy remained behind. Overwhelmed by grief I sank into the cushions of the coach that was to take me to London.

A tyrant may have surveyed the lands he was about to conquer with the same sinister and greedy glances as I now looked on the outlines of London, when the towers of the city greeted me. The tradespeople and artisans busying themselves in front of their shops and basements, the councillors immersed in profound problems coming from a meeting at the Guildhall, the shipowners and stockbrokers whose business embraced continents, the sailors and dock labourers drinking and gambling in taverns, were to me not the people of London, not the teeming crowds of the metropolis, but merely a well filled reservoir for the audiences in the London theatres, for a public which I would enthrall with the brilliance and passion of my acting.

It was the end of 1813 when I found a lodging in a miserable garret at No. 21 Cecil Street, off the Strand, and presented myself at Drury Lane offices. They paid me, without comment, my first salary, after a week. It was to me like a gift from a good fairy. I sent the larger portion of the money to Mary, so as to enable her

to join me as quickly as possible. Never before in my life had I felt so free and happy, so ready for work. A shadow, however, crossed my path. When in my eagerness to act again, I questioned Arnold, the producer, about my inaugural part, he smiled at my impetuosity and counselled trust and patience. At the end of the second week I called at the offices to draw my salary and was given to understand that the management had stopped payment. "Was I to blame for not having had an opportunity to play?" I exclaimed in anger.

"It is not a matter of playing or not playing, Mr. Kean," replied the secretary politely. "But Mr. Elliston protested against your engagement. As long as the matter remains unsettled, we cannot acknowledge you as a member of Drury Lane."

There it was again, the sinister hand of an adverse destiny, a destiny which contested the right to any share of success and happiness.

I was badly shaken.

"But they can't throw me on the streets only because it pleases Elliston to harass me!"

The secretary shrugged his shoulders. "I can't tell you any more, Mr. Kean, but if I were you, I should clear the matter up as soon as possible."

I hurried back to my lodgings and wrote to Elliston. They called him the "Napoleon of the Stage" because he combined the management of the Royal Olympic Theatre in Wych Street with that of the Surrey Theatre in Blackfriars Road and several theatres in the provinces.

"Sir,

"The fate of my family is in your hands. Are you determined to crush the object that never injured you? In one word, are you to receive our imprecations or our blessings? Through your means I am deprived of my situation in Drury Lane Theatre, unless I produce a document from you that I am not a member of the new Olympic. How can you reconcile this more than Turkish barbarity? If you must display your power, direct it against one more fortunate than myself. You have become a thorn in the side of my young fortune.

"I shall conclude by simply requesting you to inform me whether I am to become a member of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, or again, penniless, hopeless, and despised, am I to be cast on the provinces, the rejected of this great city, which should afford a home to industry of every kind? With my family at my back will I return, for the walls of Wych Street I will never enter.

"In this strong determination, but with weakened respect for you, sir, I am

E. KEAN."

Mary trembled. "You can't possibly send this letter off to Elliston. If you do, you will burn all your bridges behind you; it will spell ruin for us."

My obstinacy knew no compromise. I sent the note by special messenger to the "Napoleon of the Stage".

Elliston replied:

"To any man with the smallest gift of intellect and the dimmest sense of honour, it must appear that on the 11th of November, and previous to that time, you deemed yourself engaged to me, and that subsequently a more attractive offer having been made, you held it convenient to consider a pledge as idle words muttered in a dream. All my engagements are made and fulfilled with honour on my part, and I expect an equal punctiliousness from others.

R. W. ELLISTON."

CHAPTER IX

FIRES OF BATTLE

My position was desperate. A weaker man would have given in and made his peace with Elliston. I, however, knew that I could not be compared with the average actor, and that my development had to follow rather different lines. This sure knowledge, so essential to one climbing to greatness through his own effort, was no mere conceit or vanity on my part. One might smile at this arrogance, saying: "Why be so sure of your London triumphs? You are more likely to win them on the open road." Yet, to give in, meant the betrayal of my own individuality.

I spent my time loitering round Drury Lane, a misunderstood genius, knocking at the gates, yet not admitted.

Arnold met me with cold reserve. No, no! All explanations were futile. The first principle of Drury Lane was: "Honour." An actor breaking a contract violated the unwritten law of integrity amongst artists.

I became a familiar figure at the doors of the theatre. The actors on their way to morning rehearsals and evening performances smiled mockingly at the insignificant, dejected-looking man who followed them with burning glances. They looked at him with suspicion as a dangerous rival lying in wait to deprive them of their parts. They made fun of the little man who, imagining he roared like a lion, was in fact only a cub from the provinces, prowling around the London offices, in search of any stray morsel.

I did not give way. I was on the spot week after week, a shadow, shrinking in stature but growing in menace. They felt uncomfortable at the sight of so much silent fanaticism and ordered the porter to refuse my entrance in the future to the precincts of the theatre.

London! A sea of houses! myriads of people! All intent on their trade. A phantomlike hustle and bustle! Thousands of people with masklike faces pass on, jostle each other as strangers, concerned only with their own woe, their own happiness. Like a tiny grain of sand in this vast desert of humanity Edmund Kean, in utter despair, felt himself of no account.

In this state of dejection I wrote to my former manager at Dorchester. Not that I expected salvation from him. It was the

cry of a lost soul in need of a word of sympathy and understanding, without hope of any response.

"My dear Lee,

"I am in a damned situation, or rather, in no situation at all. Elliston has claimed my services, but I will never join him. The Drury Lane committee have decided against me, and have actually withdrawn my salary. Not all the world's ills shall force me into Wych Street. So here am I in London, without friends, without money, and a brand upon me by which I can acquire nothing."

Weeks passed without the slightest change in my position. We were starving. Mary went about with a tragic look; she suffered for her husband's stubbornness. Aunt Tid fluttered in and out of the offices at Drury Lane like a frightened bird and summoned all her persuasive powers to restore her protégé to favour.

"If you do not take the first step, Edmund," she sighed reprovingly, "you must not be surprised if Fate simply tramples on you."

I shrugged my shoulders in silence. I felt lost.

In the end the combined efforts of Aunt Tid and Arnold succeeded in bringing about a meeting between Elliston and me.

Elliston, in his superior manner, held to the letter of the contract; Arnold, as representative of Drury Lane, insisted on his agreement made with me.

I felt like a seed of grain between two grindstones of which neither yielded in hardness to the other.

"It's madness!" I cried out and seized my hat. "Am I to be the victim of the rivalry between ambitious producers? Is the law of individuality not superior to the written law? Is the right to live not above the right to work? Why not cut me in half, gentlemen, and to have your own way, make each struggling half perform on your stage?"

"Be reasonable, Kean," said Arnold, reassuringly.

Elliston, however, who was wont to assert himself against the irresponsibility and lack of discipline among turbulent actors, blazed out in anger:

"What arrogance! You were unknown, Mr. Kean! If I was good enough to help you escape from obscurity, you must admit that I should be allowed to gather in the fruits of my perspicacity."

Had I known Elliston then as I know him now, after years of friendship and productive collaboration, never could there have occurred those violent clashes with, alas, such disastrous, most lamentable consequences to me. Yet my highly irritable state of

mind at that time made me always see this Giant of the Stage merely as "Jove on his throne", whereas in reality Elliston, the actor, in his blended private and professional habits, that harmonious fusion of the manners of the player into those of everyday life, was very much akin to me.

Elliston's asseveration seems to sound in my ears to this day: "I am the same person off the stage that I am on." And, indeed, wherever Elliston walked, sate, or stood still, there was the theatre, and a spirited performance was always going on before your eyes, with nothing to pay.

He was steeped in his art; he loved it with his whole being. He was infatuated with the world of make-believe as only an inveterate mummer could be who would starve rather than do without the gay frippery of the stage. But as a producer he was a despot. When, during rehearsals, our eyes met, hard as flint, there could be no doubt whatever that here there were two artists confronting each other, hot-headed, fanatic, allowing no compromise, because each felt it to be his sacred, even divine, mission to carry out his ideals.

It was a different Elliston, who, between rehearsals and box-office worries in Temple Tavern thoroughly enjoyed his roast mutton with a preliminary haddock, and chuckling smirkingly declared, "I never eat but one thing at dinner (reckoning fish as nothing!)"—a different Elliston indeed from the man who made the actors dance to his own tune, who severely punished licentiousness, and who acknowledged only one principle in his theatre: "Having consecrated your life and soul to the stage you should have the courage to face even hell and impress the devil himself with a sample of your talent!"

I had never met anyone like Elliston before; he seemed alien, antagonistic to me. I saw him pre-eminently as my foe and oppressor. Therefore it was not surprising that the result of this last meeting, too, was a fiasco. I felt with anxiety that it rather widened the gap between me and fame, between my family and sheltered security.

Once more starvation was stalking about. It was harder to bear in crowded London than on the open road. Christmas was near; I realized that I could not even secure a crust of bread for wife and child.

Was I to give up the struggle? Was I to slink back into the darkness from which I had hoped to rise like a star in brilliance and glory?

I clenched my fists. I saw only too clearly that I was confronted with a force that could easily crush me.

At last, immediately before Christmas, Elliston changed his mind. Was there a more human chord in the actor-manager touched by the softening spirit of Christmastide, the festival of the family? or was this change due to Aunt Tid's untiring efforts? Be it as it may: Elliston was prepared to let me go, if I pledged myself to play in his theatre in Birmingham during the summer vacations.

I held my breath when the news was brought to me. I hardly dared to think it true. I blindly grasped Mary's hot and trembling hand. My ears so unaccustomed to kind words drank in eagerly her fervent cry:

"He who is destined by fate to be great, shall not perish, even if Hell command it!"

The offices at Drury Lane assured me to my joy that nothing now stood in the way of my engagement. But the knowledge that I should have to start from the very beginning was like a poisoned barb to my ambition. This meant that I should have to wait my turn. During weeks of idleness I saw others climb their way to fame, whilst I was condemned to look forward to an uncertain future and curb my burning ambition. Useless to tell me this was the lot of an actor, a mere plaything of blind forces at the mercy of producer and manager!

Who can tell if ever a chance to prove my worth would have come my way had not two other players lost their positions by the mediocrity of their acting.

The end of January 1814 at last gave me my chance. The committee disturbed by these failures were forced willy-nilly to turn to Edmund Kean, provincial actor.

The gentlemen seated in comfortable armchairs or standing about in the shadow of curtains showed a troubled mien. Hardened in the fire of many a stage battle they had long since lost their youthful optimism.

The impression that my external appearance made on them was the most unfavourable imaginable.

So this was the discovery of good old Arnold? A shabby mummer, 5 ft. 5 in. in height; no more, no less! And for the sake of this slender, insignificant lad they had battled with Elliston? They had undertaken obligations in addition to the already overburdened finances of the theatre? What could Arnold have been thinking of to allow himself to be carried away by this alleged hero of the provinces?

The chairman of the committee rose with the majestic dignity

of his position, nodded to Arnold reproachfully; then turning carelessly to me said: "My dear man, I am afraid I forget your name."

The prisoner at the bar turned pale. I realized the humiliation aimed at me. If only I could have countered his majestic aloofness with a well-directed upper-cut. But the despair which emanated from Arnold's silent figure disarmed me. Nothing else remained but to whisper in like despair:

"My name is Edmund Kean."

"Kean," nodded the chairman. It sounded as if he already had forgotten the name before taking it in.

"You will, of course, realize, Mr. —, that Drury Lane could hardly consider you for principal parts. Your physique, your bearing——"

Silently I gnashed my teeth.

"In a word," continued the chairman in his crushing manner, "we shall give you a chance to play in skirmishes, in minor parts, to show your capabilities."

I recollect the scene still clearly, as if it had happened yesterday. I felt the destiny of a human being was in my keeping at that moment. If I had yielded, my career would have been decided for good; London would have had one more small-part player. But I knew quite well where I belonged. So I rebelled with all my might against this tyrannical decree.

Here stood I, Edmund Kean, in this dim holy of holies, my eyes blazing like torches, as if they would set the theatre alight. With the strength of a Samson I wrestled for recognition, for the right to live. The gentlemen, only a moment ago so dejected and disappointed, stared at me in bewilderment. They seemed mesmerised by the fierceness in my untamed look as if afraid of being scorched by its fire.

All or nothing was my verdict. They had engaged me at Drury Lane at a high salary. Were they to pay eight, nine, ten pounds per week to a mere nobody? Now it was I who insisted on my contract, on the management's obligations to give me adequate parts.

"Should the critics, should the public refuse me recognition," I shouted, "well and good, I am ready to vanish into outer darkness, where you, gentlemen, would like to relegate me at this instant. But to leave the field without a fight, to lay down my arms without giving you proof of my courage, is a demand I must decline with indignation."

Perplexed silence followed my outburst.

Was there standing before them a giant whose broad chest,

whose ringing voice filled the space? And was this giant the same puny actor who now, with easy gesture, turned to the door, spurning all compromise?

The chairman followed my movement uneasily. He said:

"Very well, Mr.—Kean! You may jump into the breach made by two of your fellow-actors. You shall not credit us with the reproach that Drury Lane condemns actors solely for their first impression."

And turning to Arnold he continued: "Arrange for a production of *The Merchant of Venice*. Mr.—Kean will make his first appearance as Shylock."

CHAPTER X

THE SUN BREAKS THROUGH CLOUDS

PASSING through the gates of Drury Lane to attend my first rehearsal, I did not, as formerly, bow my head in dejection. The porter saluted me and murmured my name not without respect. "A different wind is blowing," I observed. Then I stepped on to the stage in semi-darkness.

The prompter was there, Thomas Dibdin by name, the call-boy and a few stagehands. Some actors cast for the play were late; they were moodily sitting or standing about in the green room. At last Arnold, the producer, appeared and urged us to hurry.

I raised objections.

How could I rehearse if the principal players were not present? But Arnold interrupted and said incisively:

"We'll go through your part, Kean. It is essential that you should become thoroughly at home on the stage."

"There is no need for that," I replied in an injured tone. "You may rouse me in the middle of the night with a pistol shot and give me any cue you like, I shall prove to you that, without hesitation, I can enter into any mood or feeling of Shylock. But I should have thought that a theatre of the standing of Drury Lane——"

Arnold clapped his hands.

"Scene 3. Bassanio—Shylock——"

The callboy stepped out of the dark and announced that Bassanio had sent apologies for his absence.

"Go on then! Act 2, scene 5, Shylock—Launcelot—Jessica."

Launcelot was there, but not Jessica.

Arnold grumbled, his temper was rising: "Always the same unpunctuality and carelessness. Go on, go on! Act 3, scene 1, Solanio—Salarino—Shylock—Tubal."

Solanio emerged from behind the wings, and Tubal was fetched from the green-room. They declaimed their parts grudgingly, without a semblance of interest, whilst they kept their hands in their coat-pockets.

The rehearsal, or rather what should have been one, was over. It was of little use to go more deeply into the matter. Arnold comforted me. Moreover, it could be no pleasure for the actors

to rehearse this play over and over again with every newcomer; they were already sick to death of it.

The rehearsals following were very little different. It even happened at times that there was no one there except me and the prompter. When, however, just before the date of the production the actors at last condescended to put in an appearance they met my restless, burning glances with displeasure and undisguised derision. Had I at last succeeded? Was I no longer the ridiculous beggar at the porter's lodge, but an actor with a promise of leading parts for which many a greater celebrity had to pay dearly?

With a surly laziness they drawled out their parts until, as rehearsal progressed, I clearly showed my determination to play my part according to a new and individual conception contrary to all stage-tradition. Then they encountered me with obstinate distrust; from scene to scene it grew stronger, finally developing into open rebellion.

The stage buzzed with excitement like a hornet's nest.

Even Arnold seemed put out.

"My dear Kean, London audiences are conservative. They have to get accustomed to a new actor. But if this new actor comes along with new ideas into the bargain, they will resent his foolhardiness as an insult and will reward him accordingly."

Arnold's advice could not shake my determination.

"I cannot interpret a part against my own conviction. Shylock is not a figure of fun. A thinking actor is impelled to stress the tragic element inherent in this man's destiny."

"I warn you, Kean," replied Arnold excitedly, "the gallery makes demands. If Shylock is not driven out of the temple with scorn and ridicule they will show antagonism to the actor."

I was raging inwardly. "We shall see."

When I passed the green-room I saw my colleagues putting their heads together and discussing the "new gentleman". Old Dowton sipped his spiced toddy and smiled patriarchally:

"This young upstart will have to sow his wild oats first. New ideas, indeed! Pah! I have been forty-five years on the boards, but believe me, there is no building a bridge across the ocean!"

The younger artists did not show the same stoic serenity as Dowton. I had to suffer their open animosity, and the final rehearsals were rendered very unpleasant by their intolerance.

Even Aunt Tid realized the gravity of the situation, and as she could see no possibility of a peaceful settlement, advised me earnestly to renounce my part.

I stared at her, speechless with amazement.

To renounce my part? To destroy deliberately my great chance to rise from obscurity?

I shook my head. I was immovable in my obstinacy. I felt that something was driving me the right and only way to my goal. It was futile to fight against one's own fate.

It was an icy cold day on 26th January 1814. The Thames was frozen, and a Frost Fair with gambols on the river, with muttons to be roasted whole was going to be prepared. The wind was sharp and biting. Placards announced:

THEATRE ROYAL, DRURY-LANE

This present WEDNESDAY, January 26, 1814,
Their Majesties' Servants will perform Shakespeare's Play of the
MERCHANT OF VENICE

Duke of Venice, MR. R. PHILIPS,

Antonio, MR. POWELL,

Bassanio, MR. RAE,

Solanio, MR. I. WALLACK, Salarino, MR. CROOKE,

Gratiano, MR. WRENCH,

Lorenzo, MR. PHILIPS,

With the Songs, "To keep my gentle Jessy" (composed by DR. ARNE) and "Softly rise, O southern breeze" (by DR. BOYCE)

Shylock, MR. KEAN, from the Theatre Royal, Exeter

(His first Appearance at this Theatre)

Launcelot, MR. OXBERRY,

Tubal, MR. MADDOCKS, Balthazar, MR. BUXTON,

Gobbo, MR. WEWITZER,

Portia, MISS SMITH,

Nerissa, MRS. HARLOWE,

Jessica, MRS. BLAND,

With the Song, "Haste, Lorenzo" (composed by DR. ARNE).

In Act III, a Duett, by MRS. BLAND and MR. PHILIPPS

(Composed by MR. SHAW)

After which, will be revived (First Time these Nine Years),

Murphy's Farce of the

APPRENTICE

Wingate, MR. GATTIE,

Dick, MR. BANNISTER,

Gargle, MR. PENSON,

Simon, MR. OXBERRY,

Irishman, MR. FISHER, Scotchman, MR. CARR,
Porter, MR. BUXTON, Watchman, MR. CHATTERLEY,
Spouters, MESSRS. EVANS, I. WEST, APPLEBY, &C.

Charlotte, MRS. ORGER.

Vivant Rex et Regina

No Money to be Returned

To-morrow (10th time), the favourite New Opera of Narensky,
with (26th time), the

GRAND ORIENTAL Spectacle of

ILLUSION:

Or, the TRANCES OF NOURJAHAD.

But the few people hurrying through the streets, muffled up and blue from the cold, did not even stop to glance at the advertisement.

Towards the evening I made haste to the theatre. I had Shylock's gabardine over my arm. I felt nervy and intense and avoided my colleagues. I changed in my humble dressing-room, made up for the part and finally put on my wig. When ready I stepped behind the scenes, the same scenes which, as a boy, I had gazed at with rapturous glances and fervent longing.

There were many empty seats in the boxes, and the pit was not half full. Even the members of the committee had preferred to spend the evening at their cosy fireside. The whole presented a dreary, hopeless aspect. The atmosphere in the wings was tense, if not hostile. The actors stared at my mask. I could read in their shocked faces the question:

"I say, he has got a black wig and beard, did you ever see Shylock in a black wig? Within the memory of man it has been customary to represent the Jew with flaming red hair. All of a sudden this provincial stroller comes along and wants to show us that he is smarter than his forerunners."

The opening signal cut discussion short. The curtain rose. I stood silently behind the scenes waiting for my cue.

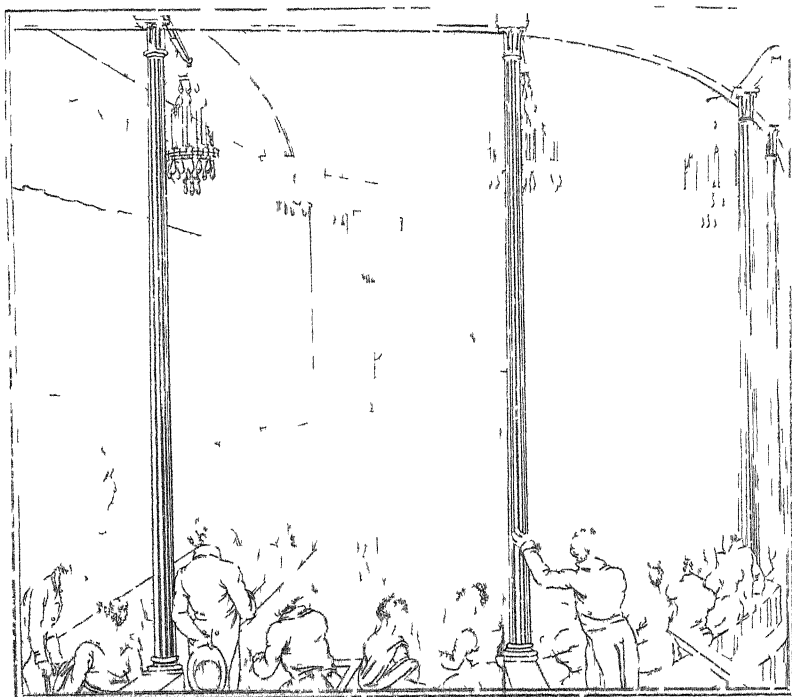
As to the effect of my performance on this memorable evening—which was to determine my future—I have to fall back on the judgement of the press critics and on the private manifestations of the public shown to me at a later date. I shall not dwell, therefore, on my own personal feelings and reactions but shall endeavour to report this event from an objective point of view.

Scene 3, Bassanio—Shylock.

An undersized Jew in gabardine and beard walks by the side of Bassanio, the Venetian. Despite the insignificance of his ap-



KEAN AS SHYLOCK. LONDON
Published by Hodgson & Co.



INTERIOR VIEW OF DRURY LANE THEATRE

Drawn by N. Heideloff

THEATRE ROYAL, DRURY LANE.

Admission TWO to the BOXES *Box 22*

Edmund Kean

Admitted only as the three first persons who
 Queue will be given.

pearance, this Shylock is not the dirty, crooked, humble Ghetto-Jew whom the gallery used to greet with mocking laughter, but rather a patrician; a patrician who does not conduct himself as a petty usurer in his dealings with Christian merchants on the Rialto.

And when Antonio appears, Shylock seems to grow by inches. His eyes, these dark, expressive eyes are blazing with hatred. In his voice, not guttural, but clear and sonorous, rings hatred:

“Should I not say,
‘Hath a dog money? is it possible
A cur can lend three thousand ducats?’ or
Shall I bend low, and in a bondsman’s key,
With ’bated breath and whispering humbleness,
Say this? . . .
‘Fair sir, you spit on me on Wednesday last;
You spurn’d me such a day; another time
You call’d me dog; and for these courtesies
I’ll lend you thus much moneys.’ ”

It was as it had been in Exeter. I sensed that the public sat up and listened intently. Here there was a different tone. They were not clear as yet where the difference came in. But the tense silence which filled the hall testified to their close attention; curiosity held them spellbound—if nothing else.

The money deal between Antonio and Shylock was concluded. Did the audience feel only surprise at this totally different characterization of Shylock put before them by a young newcomer? Did they accept it or did they feel cheated?

On the stage stood a fighter undaunted by his challengers; not the traditional, decrepit, wrinkled Jew, not just a representative of the Venetian ghetto, hitting back from an inherited sense of race animosity and injustice, but a chieftain of all disinherited and oppressed peoples, great even in his hatred, a visionary knowing the hour of triumph to be near.

The end of the act brought surprisingly warm applause.

I shut my eyes and took a deep breath. I had not noticed Aunt Tid fluttering towards me from behind a prop till she whispered excitedly:

“Child, child, they have taken you to their hearts. So good luck to you!”

I felt I was in contact with the public. During the evening I gained ground. The scene with Jessica showed further that I would not make Shylock a farcical, despicable speculator.

The scene with Solanio and Salarino at the beginning of Act 3 offered me an opportunity to rouse the conscience and the humanitarian sentiments of every onlooker. I revealed the abyss that separated "God's creatures" from one another. An accuser, I stood before them hurling these words in their faces like a challenge:

"I am a Jew! Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that."

But the following scene with Tubal finally decided the attitude of the public towards me and with it my destiny.

Tubal appears. Shylock is torn between wild joy and intense despair.

Emotions, up till now latent, surge upon him and find expression. The love of the betrayed father; the disappointment of the usurer cheated out of his gain; the triumph over his ruined adversary. Joy and grief, praises and curses succeed in turn. This hour of acute tension gave birth to something in me which I always had conceived as the summit of artistic characterization: Shylock not just an individual, but mankind himself; trampled on, crushed, revolting, crying out, triumphant, lamenting and groaning. Hatred, this unbridled force is beyond good and evil:

"I will have the heart of him if he forfeit!"

The applause of the transported audience descended on me like torrential rain. It brought the actors from behind the scenes and from the green-room. They stood there disconcerted, confronted with a perplexing phenomenon.

In the lights of the stage they witnessed a strange spectacle; this little actor, Edmund Kean, only yesterday unknown, rejected, mocked at, springing to fame in one night as the favourite of the London public.

I am not ashamed to confess: my whole being was a-tremble with distrust and despondency. Yet not a muscle of my face quivered to reveal my profound emotion.

The play continues. The tragedy of Shylock involuntarily becomes the centre of interest. Words of fiercest hatred like a roaring tempest come from his agonized soul:

"I'll have my bond; speak not against my bond.
I have sworn an oath that I will have my bond.
Thou call'dst me dog before thou hadst a cause:
But, since I am a dog, beware my fangs!"

He stands before the Court of Justice not as a supplicant seeking for mercy, but an aristocrat, an equal of Antonio, the royal merchant. Conscious of his rights, he insists on his bond. He seems to grow in stature. The sacred Law is his armour commanding respect even from his enemies.

Portia, as the judge, is now appearing. She is apparently on the side of Shylock.

"A Daniel come to judgement! yea, a Daniel!
O wise young judge! how I do honour thee!"

Shylock is triumphant. Even the scales are in readiness to weigh the flesh.

At that moment fate hurls him down to hell:

"This bond doth give thee here no jot of blood;
The words expressly are a pound of flesh:
Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh;
But, in the cutting it, if thou dost shed
One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods
Are, by the laws of Venice, confiscate
Unto the state of Venice."

Extinguished is Shylock's hatred. Deep despair takes its place, descending on him like a thunderbolt. His opponents, under cover of law, rush towards him, Destitute, ruined, he is at their mercy.

Abhorrence for Shylock becomes sympathy. Terrible is his fall from the battlements of law; terrible the agony to which he helplessly succumbs:

"I pray you, give me leave to go from hence:
I am not well, send the deed after me
And I will sign it."

A wretched, beaten, doomed figure staggers from the stage. . . .

Aunt Tid had been watching in the wings; she embraced me and covered my hair with kisses.

From the hall came the applause of the wildly enthusiastic crowd; it grew in intensity, till the clapping, stamping and shouting reverberated from the walls of the theatre.

I tore the Shylock beard from my chin. Exhausted I sat there

cowed and frightened like a bird in a storm. My eyes burnt in their sockets.

I awoke the following morning still feeling doubtful and suspicious of my new life. Only when Mary, with a happy smile, handed me the newspapers, acclaiming my triumph, could I believe in my victory. I sat up in bed and, like a child, surrounded myself with newspapers; I only had to stretch out my hand for them to convince myself of the reality of it all. Opposite on the wall a mirror reflected my image: a pale face, dishevelled black hair, dark eyes in which exaltation and despondency still wrestled with each other. I smoothed down my tousled hair, seized a paper at random and read. William Hazlitt, the dramatic critic of the *Morning Chronicle*, wrote:

“Mr. Kean (of whom report has spoken so highly) made his appearance at Drury Lane in the character of Shylock. For voice, eye, action, and expression, no actor has come out for many years at all equal to him. The applause, from the first scene to the last, was general, loud, and uninterrupted. Indeed, the very first scene in which he comes on with Bassanio and Antonio, shewed the master in his art, and at once decided the opinion of the audience. Perhaps it was the most perfect of any. Notwithstanding the complete success of Mr. Kean in Shylock, we question whether he will not become a greater favourite in other parts. There was a lightness and vigour in his tread, a buoyancy and elasticity of spirit, a fire and animation, which would accord better with almost any other character than with the morose, sullen, inward, inveterate, inflexible malignity of Shylock. The character of Shylock is that of a man brooding over one idea, that of its wrongs, and bent on an unalterable purpose, that of revenge. In conveying a profound impression of this feeling, we have seen actors more successful than Mr. Kean, but in giving effect to the conflict of passions arising out of the contrast of situation, in varied vehemence of declamation, in keenness of sarcasm, in the rapidity of his transition from one tone or feeling to another, in propriety and novelty of action, presenting a succession of striking pictures, and giving perpetually fresh shocks of delight and surprise, it would be difficult to single out a competitor. The fault of his acting was (if we may hazard an objection), an over-display of the resources of the art, which gave too much relief to the hard, impenetrable, dark ground-work of the character of Shylock. It would be needless to point out individual beauties, where almost every passage

was received with equal and deserved applause. His style of acting is, if we may use the expression, more significant, more pregnant with meaning, more varied and alive in every part, than any we have almost ever witnessed. The character never stands still; there is no vacant pause in the action: the eye is never silent. It is not saying too much of Mr. Kean, though it is saying a great deal, that he has all that Mr. Kemble wants of perfection."

Sadly smiling I dropped the paper. What can be the significance of a light under a bushel? What force can the actor's art wield, if it is to be wasted in the obscurity of a barn-theatre? Only publicity can give it brilliance. Only the world's recognition can make art a mighty reality, can fan its spark into a living flame.

I jumped out of bed. Throwing the counterpane like a royal cloak round my shoulders I enjoyed the reflection of myself as conquering hero in the mirror.

The next performance of *The Merchant of Venice* on February 1st showed the box-office receipts doubled; the house was overcrowded at the following performances on February 3rd, 5th, 8th and 10th.

My colleagues did not by any means attribute this fact to the actor who had strayed in from the provinces. Aunt Tid told me of the talk in the green-room; they were in no mind to admit that here was the saviour of Drury Lane in its financial distress. Old Dowton, however, could not refrain from poking fun at me, growling like a chained dog:

"God renounce me, 'tis only necessary nowadays to be under four foot high, have bandy legs and a hoarseness, and mince my liver, but you'll be thought a great tragedian!"

The actors laughed maliciously. They abused the dramatic critics for their lack of intelligence and called the audience an ignorant mob.

"Nay," remarked Munden with a sneer, "no-doubt the little man has great powers of entertainment, for I hear he's a wonderful tumbler."

Bannister burst out laughing merrily, and replied with a courage rather surprising in this circle:

"Of that there can be no doubt, for he has jumped over the heads of us all."

Aunt Tid knew how to relate these little titbits of the green-room in her own saucy way. And we laughed heartily at the interest these mummers were betraying in me.

A further surprise and satisfaction awaited me when, a few days after my first appearance, Arnold asked me to go and see him in his office, the holy of holies of Drury Lane. He thought it advisable that the verbal agreement made months ago at Dorchester, should be followed up by a written contract.

As I entered the committee room I had to smile in spite of myself. What had happened to the cool haughtiness, the animosity of the committee members? A cordial atmosphere greeted me instead.

"I am so glad, dear Kean," I heard Lord Essex say, "that we acted on a healthy intuition, when we entrusted the part of Shylock to you."

He shook my hand amicably. The rest of the committee followed his example with equal cordiality: The Hon. George Lamb, the Hon. Douglas Kinnaird, the friend and banker of Lord Byron, Mr. Whitbread, the manager, brewer and M.P., and Mr. Peter Moore.

"I can't conceal the fact," resumed Lord Essex, "that the finances of Drury Lane were in a rather critical state, before you came, dear Kean. Your success, however, has reversed this position favourably; and we hope it will be maintained."

I was formally asked to sign the contract. It assured me of a salary for three years, rising from £8-£10 per week. But after having done so, Lord Essex smiling significantly took hold of the document, tore it into pieces. Then, to my astonishment explained:

"You are entitled, dear Kean, to learn the reason of my strange behaviour."

A second document was handed to him by his secretary.

Lord Essex turned to me:

"Be so good as to sign this second contract as well; it differs only slightly from the original." With this he smiled mysteriously; this smile seemed infectious, because all the members beamed at me. Still looking apprehensively at the chairman and his companions I seized the document and read:

"The actor Kean is to receive for the duration of three years a salary of £20:0:0 per week."

My heart almost ceased beating. Only a short time ago I had to keep my family on twenty shillings a week. I felt that at last my triumph had become an inviolable truth.

CHAPTER XI

CONQUEST OF LONDON

IT is essential in the world of the theatre that the actor should mention the applause of the audience to demonstrate his successes. He may be called conceited, vain and arrogant. He can only measure the effect of his art on the public by this applause, this clapping, frantic cheering, these calls of bravo. It is his Life, his Happiness, his End. Or, as William Hazlitt once explained it: "Players have little reason to complain of their hard-earned, short-lived popularity. One thunder of applause from pit, boxes, and galleries, is equal to a whole immortality of posthumous fame."

Do not, therefore, rebuke them for their vanity in wishing to be constantly in the public eye. Do not reprove me for speaking repeatedly and with pride of the successes which accompanied my career. Posterity will not know of us. Our voice will not sound beyond the grave. Our fame is blotted out by the fame of our successor. Fundamentally we are poor, timid fellows who live to-day and are gone to-morrow. We make you laugh, we make you cry. But the cares of life lap like eternal waves over the shifting sands of our glorious world of make-believe.

If I state that my fame, my power of attraction increased with every part, I have only to refer to the registered receipts of the box-office, to the eulogies of the press, to the tributes of flowers, letters and poems sent to me by unknown admirers and to the inevitable encounters with female worshippers, young and old.

In February 1814, when I was billed as Richard III, Drury Lane was besieged by crowds of people even in the early afternoon; the surrounding lanes were blocked by carriages belonging to the most notable people in England. Small wonder that the bills henceforth announced: "All persons to whom the favour has been granted of a Free-Admission to this theatre, are particularly requested by the Sub-Committee of Management, to abstain from the use of such indulgence on the nights of Mr. Kean's performance."

My Richard was held to be in advance of my Shylock.

"One of the finest pieces of acting we have ever beheld, or perhaps that the stage has ever known," wrote the *Morning Post*.

And Byron, whom I had soon the privilege of counting amongst my friends and most ardent admirers, entered in his diary:

"Just returned from seeing Kean in *Richard*. By Jove, he is a soul! Life, nature, truth, without exaggeration or diminution. Kemble's Hamlet is perfect;—but Hamlet is not Nature. Richard is a man, and Kean is Richard."

Byron seems to have hit the nail on the head, when he wrote "Richard is a man!" At all events, I always saw him as a man and not as the hypocritical cynic, the crooked monster; I saw in him a man steeled in bloody war, a hero whose eyes could kill swifter than his hands; I saw the fanatic fighting with mailed fists for crown, empire and life.

At this stage I have to stress the point that at no time have I aimed at showing on the stage a mere individual; I always endeavoured to give my interpretations a universal appeal. The heroic element meant more to me than detailed characterization. I often wondered, what exactly it was in my acting that held the public and carried them away; it must have been the force and greatness, the passion and intensity of my temperament. I never stopped to analyse the figure to be represented and to assemble the parts into a new being. Thus, despite the shortcomings of my personal appearance, any character in my keeping became a hero on the stage—as witness Shylock and the misshapen Richard.

According to the unanimous verdict of the critics, this Richard rose to unsuspected force and dignity in the death scene. Kean, the fencer, so it was said, would not permit his enemies to encircle and slaughter him like a hunted deer. With his rapier he chases Richmond all over the stage, until, amidst the breathless silence of the excited audience, he is struck down by his enemy. He staggers, he seems to rear, and, with a last terrible effort, he fights on, till the sword falls from his inert hand; even then, though disarmed, dying, he aims at his opponent with empty fist.

William Hazlitt, in the *Morning Chronicle*, wrote about this scene:

"He fights at last like one drunk with wounds; and the attitude in which he stands with his hands stretched out, after his sword is wrested from him, has a preternatural and terrific grandeur, as if his will could not be disarmed, and the very phantoms of his despair had power to kill."

The ecstasy of the public, the battles fought to secure seats for the performances, showed me clearly that I had to continue on the same lines as hitherto.

Who, therefore, will reproach me, if in the full knowledge of my victories, I rushed up the stairs to our lodging in Cecil Street, calling out triumphantly to Mary and my son:

"Our fortune is made! Mary, you shall ride in your own car-

riage, and you, Charley, shall become an Eton boy. The whole world is at my feet; every kingdom of the world. I have only to stretch out my hands and mine is what I desire!"

The committee of Drury Lane, in acknowledgement of my artistic achievements, presented me with a gratuity of £100. Lord Essex honoured me with the gift of a richly chased dagger as a special token of his esteem. All London seemed to be stirred by the genius of this young actor, so recently obscure and unknown. Even my colleagues realized that it would be only short of madness to cold-shoulder me.

Richard III was followed by the production of *Hamlet* in March of the same year. William Hazlitt hailed me from the very start with eager cordiality, and contrasted my style of acting favourably with the academic rigidity of John Philip Kemble's art, in no wise sparing me, however, from his biting remarks. He wrote:

"The interest depends not on the action, but on the thoughts—on 'that within which passeth shew'. Yet, in spite of these difficulties, Mr. Kean's representation of the character had the most brilliant success. We will say at once, in what we think his general delineation of the character wrong. It was too strong and pointed. *Hamlet* is full of 'weakness and melancholy', but there is no harshness in his nature. *Hamlet* should be the most amiable of misanthropes. There is no line in this play which should be spoken like any line in *Richard*; yet Mr. Kean did not appear to keep the two characters always distinct."

In spite of these remarks the performance enhanced my fame. The public, still remembering the mannerisms of Old John Philip Kemble, gave me ovation after ovation. Kemble himself, who was playing at Covent Garden at that time, had to convince himself personally of his rival's success. Hidden in the recesses of a box, he saw me act *Richard III*. This criticism of me to some of his friends spread like wildfire the day after:

"I did not see Mr. Kean at all, I only saw *Richard*!"

And when urged to say more about my work he is said to have pronounced reluctantly:

"Our styles of acting are totally different, that you must not expect me to like Mr. Kean; but one thing I must say in his favour—he is at all times terribly in earnest."

David Garrick's widow, although nearly ninety, still showed a keen interest in the productions of Drury Lane. Present at the first night of *Hamlet* she was so fascinated and deeply moved by my acting that she invited me to her home—a house in Adelphi Terrace built by the brothers Adam, decorated by Angelica

Kauffmann. This delicate, nimble little person, once brought into the English world under the patronage of Lord Burlington, as a Mademoiselle Violette, a dancer, from whom seemed to emanate the magic of eternal youth still in her old age, gave me a charmingly warm welcome. She asked me to be seated in the leather armchair which David Garrick had occupied up to the day of his death.

"I have never up till now seen an actor perform on the stage who approached so near to the genius of Garrick," she said in her animated way. "You are, indeed, the Master's worthy successor." Her eyes betrayed emotion.

She was dwelling on the old days of English classical acting.

"We ought to be friends, dear Kean," she said smiling in her motherly way, while stroking my hair. "Believe me, oftentimes I have been in despair about the development of the theatre when I had to watch charlatans instead of actors. Since I have seen you as Hamlet, however, I feel certain there will always be 'the chosen few' to carry on."

With a gesture touching in its solemnity she went to a writing desk in a corner of the room, once Garrick's, took from it a precious object and showed it to the young visitor. It was a pair of gloves shabby and old-fashioned. But when the little old lady whispered to me in awe: "He himself wore them—William Shakespeare"—a shiver went through me and I bowed my head reverently before the relic of a bygone day.

Eagerly the old woman rummaged for more treasured keepsakes and fetched from an old chest the theatre jewels which once had adorned David Garrick in his best parts.

"They are only coloured glass," said she, revelling in her memories, "yet they are dearer to me than the most precious diamonds."

I smiled to myself as, pondering deeply, I fingered the chains, clasps and orders, when suddenly the old lady straightened and bravely exclaimed:

"No one has been found worthy of them until now. Take them—they are yours. And be for ever mindful of the obligations to art which the ownership of these cheap jewels demands from you."

I was deeply moved. Even with the noisy ovations of my audiences still ringing in my ears, the tender homage of this aged little lady meant more to me at the time than the loudest applause of an enthusiastic gallery.

Othello was the last performance in which I played before the

theatre closed for the summer vacation. It brought almost greater success than hitherto.

Hazlitt, in the *Morning Chronicle*, wrote:

"His success was fully equal to the arduousness of the undertaking. In general, we might observe that he displayed the same excellences and the same defects as in his former characters. His voice and person were not altogether in consonance with the character, nor was there throughout that noble tide of deep and sustained passion, impetuous, but majestic; that 'flows on to the Propontic, and knows no ebb,' which raises our admiration and pity of the lofty-minded Moor. There were, however, repeated bursts of feeling and energy which we have never seen surpassed. The whole of the latter part of the third act was a masterpiece of profound pathos and exquisite conception, and its effect on the house was electrical. The tone of voice in which he delivered the beautiful apostrophe, 'Then, oh farewell!' struck on the heart and the imagination like the swelling notes of some divine music."

Indeed, the oldest playgoers could not remember such passion for theatre-going as was shown at the present time. Drury Lane was actually stormed for the performances of *Othello*, as of all other plays in which I appeared.

After a long run of the play I exchanged the part of Othello for that of Iago; it stirred my band of followers to greater admiration, it meant to them a new incitement, a new culmination of my art. Hazlitt could write with satisfaction:

"The part of Iago was played by Mr. Kean, and played with admirable facility and effect. It was the most faultless of his performances, the most consistent and entire. Perhaps the accomplished hypocrite was never so finely, so adroitly portrayed—a gay, light-hearted monster, a careless, cordial, comfortable villain. It was the least overdone of all his parts, though full of point, spirit, and brilliancy. We have already stated it as our opinion, that Mr. Kean is not a literal transcriber of his author's text; he translates his characters with great freedom and ingenuity into a language of his own; but at the same time we cannot help preferring his liberal and spirited dramatic versions, to the dull, literal, commonplace monotony of his competitors."

At the general meeting of Drury Lane proprietors the chairman freely acknowledged that during the first part of the season they had been singularly unfortunate; for they had performed the first 140 nights not merely without profit, but had suffered considerable loss.

"At this eventful period Mr. Kean appeared, and the clouds which had so long obscured that splendid edifice, were soon dissipated by the extraordinary talent of this surprising genius. From the unprecedented success which attended every appearance of Mr. Kean, it was found necessary to lengthen the season, in order to meet the wishes of thousands, who could not have been gratified had it closed at the usual period—the result had been the complete gratification of the town, and a source from which alone we should be enabled to declare a good dividend (Loud cheering from all parts of the room)."

Small wonder that those who looked upon me as their saviour recognized my services time and again with tokens of appreciation. After the first production of *Othello* they expressed their thanks to me with a bonus of £500. A benefit performance granted to me at the end of the season yielded the sum of £1,150.

I was utterly at sea—bewildered by the suddenness of my rise to fame, by the splendour radiating from my name, by the dazzling prospects in front of me. Where was the time, when begging from inn to inn, on windy highroads, I had eked out a pitiable existence for myself and family? Where the times, when, a tragi-comic figure, I stood longingly at the gates of Drury Lane for the enchanted castle of my dreams to open its doors to me?

Now, without boasting, I can say that I had become the most celebrated person in London. Lords and dukes eagerly sought my company. Sailors, coalheavers, soldiers, fish-porters, toll-gatherers nodded respectfully when my name was mentioned. Money was showered on me with prodigality. It was lying about in my house like useless lumber; on tables, mantelpieces, under chairs and in the folds of sofas. Little Charley played with it, and if he, in his childish ignorance, tore a banknote into shreds, we parents laughed heartily at what he did as over a great joke.

I openly confess, I was no match for the God Mammon. I was like the poor fellow who all of a sudden draws the first prize in a lottery. I was painfully ignorant of the value of the money that swamped me now, having hungered after it fruitlessly for years. Should my reader shake his head in doubt, I assure him that Fate, in its relentless justice, reckoned with me to the last penny and that after delicious draughts of champagne on moonlight nights I had to drain the cup of bitterness to the lees.

As with money, so with women. I was no match for them either. A celebrated actor cannot protect himself against their advances. Maidens and matrons, snub-nosed shopgirls and grand ladies, all lost their heads at my approach. It cannot be said that every actor

is by nature a Don Juan. What actor or man could disdain the easy fruit dropping into his lap, as befell me, when women, young and old, constantly invaded my house, and when they climbed through my windows on rope-ladders? They even hid in the depths of dressing-room wardrobes, among cowls, tights, and fur-trimmed robes, and fell with ecstatic "Ohs" and "Ahs" into the arms of the embarrassed artist as he opened their doors.

As for myself, I readily admit, I was no Puritan. Yet nobody can say I took advantage of the more or less comely victims who fell into a swoon at the sight of their idol.

In autumn 1814 my popularity was so great that the mere announcement of my appearance sufficed to fill the theatre to the last seat. It was quite usual for many of the waiting crowd to faint. As soon as the doors were opened, people pushed their way through corridors and upstairs with such vigour that clothes were literally torn off.

My reputation did not suffer even when as Romeo I hardly came up to the expectations of my audience. I had allowed myself to be persuaded by the committee to take this part, although I knew that I would not shine in the field of lyrics. But the appearance in London of Elizabeth O'Neill, the daughter of a poor Irish player, was greeted by the public with an enthusiasm approaching frenzy; the management of Drury Lane, therefore, thought it salutary to show both these favourites together on the stage for the delight of the theatre enthusiasts.

No such Juliet had ever been seen upon the English stage. The naturalness of her acting, her beauty and simplicity moved and excited the theatre-goers who were dazzled by such loveliness and grace.

As for myself, I fear, I hardly did justice to the part of Romeo; I gave but a sketch of him. On the other hand, my reception as Macbeth confirmed once more my position as the beloved idol of the London theatre. I was quite aware that my physique hardly corresponded to the ideal conception of a Shakespearean hero. All the more did I endeavour to stress the inner heroism and greatness of Macbeth. He has no need to be spurred on by Lady Macbeth; the urge to murder is, so to speak, inherent in his nature; an unscrupulous man, haunted by the monstrosities of his own brain.

The Times judged of my acting:

"He played the whole in a style of boldness and grandeur which we have not seen before. He was 'proud and lion-hearted, and lacked fear.' A thousand hearts seemed swelling in his

bosom. His voice rolled from the bottom of his breast like thunder, and his eye flashed scorching flame. Instead of going back (as some cunning critics, who have been peeping out of their cells at him ever since he began his career, to watch for his first failure, and to fall upon him magnanimously at a disadvantage, have been predicting), he advances even beyond himself with manly steps and an heroic spirit."

And *The Champion* wrote:

"The two finest things that Mr. Kean has ever done, are his recitation of the passage in *Othello*, 'Then, oh farewell the tranquil mind,' and the scene in *Macbeth* after the murder. The former was the highest and most perfect effort of his art. To enquire whether his manner in the latter scene was that of a king who commits a murder, or of a man who commits a murder to become a king, would be 'to consider too curiously'. But, as a lesson of common humanity, it was heart-rending. The hesitation, the bewildered look, the coming to himself when he sees his hands bloody; the manner in which his voice clung to his throat, and choked his utterance; his agony and tears, the force of nature overcome by passion—beggared description. It was a scene, which no one who saw it can ever efface from his recollection."

The critics and audience agreed that I was in no way destined to carry on in the steps of the old-fashioned John Philip Kemble. What, in reality, took place before the very eyes of the excited public was a sudden change of style tending to dethrone the academic rhetoric, the worship of the Kemble school. My representations introduced to the stage instead a passionate realism which knew no compromise.

To talk of my art and of its place in history, I know, will savour of boastfulness. Indeed, I can hear shouts of mummer's vanity and actor's conceit and megalomania. But, as I write these lines, I stand before the dark portals of the last judgement, and I am the only advocate that can plead the cause of Edmund Kean, a tragic failure who grew old before his time.

With selfless burning devotion I have served the noble art of acting all my life as, when a half-fledged boy, I performed on the tight rope; as I sang my couplets in between the acts; as I played the clown in pantomime. Night after night I succeeded in establishing the mystic contact between the actor and the masses roused to fever heat by my performances. Should fate pronounce judgement on me, a cruel judgement, as far as Kean the man is concerned, with my last remaining strength I would challenge

that relentless fate with these words: An actor's work is divine service; the stage is the altar on which Audience and Actor together sacrifice to their unknown god! If ever by my acting I have brought home to my audiences the fundamentals of drama and of my art, then by this act alone would my faults, weaknesses and vices be outweighed a hundredfold in the eyes of God!

This mystic bond between me and the public did not confine itself to the theatre alone. It exposed also my private life as if to the glare of the footlights. This perplexed me at first, but gradually revealed the effect of my art on the people. Kean became a household-word to rich and poor, young and old. They looked on Kean as on an accomplished fact, as on something unshakable, inexhaustible—like the Pyramids of Egypt or the Niagara Falls.

Yet the more my art, my person, my position in society advanced the more they contributed, as I now see it, to my terrible plunge to ruin. No power on earth could prevent the people from indulging their darling to excess, from worshipping my person, from elevating me to a demigod. Add to this the heritage I was to carry through all my days—from my father, the drunkard, from my mother, the gipsy woman, who restlessly tramped the open road from village to village.

The attraction I exercised on the nobility opened for me the doors of mansions and palaces which had a revolutionary effect on my bourgeois life. I was not only compelled to move into a more elegant house—taking Lady Rycroft's house at 12 Clarges Street, off Piccadilly—and to play the host to London society people like a grandseigneur, but, owing to their worship, I was led into the temptation of practising all kinds of eccentric habits so as to differ in my mode of living from ordinary mortals.

To-day looking back on that epoch of exaltation and constant pretence which filled my life, I see it did not lack a certain comic element. The strangest, most fantastic tales were spread about me and were unnecessarily embellished with romantic details.

The London public saw me keeping a lion cub, training it in my drawing-room, frightening unsuspicious visitors with its presence, or taking it with me when rowing on the Thames.

Hazlitt once gave the following description:

"Mr. Kean keeps a lion 'for his pastime, that he may take pleasure with him when he is minded so to do.' It is, to be sure, an American lion, a pumah, a sort of a great dog. But still it shews the nature of the man, and the spirited turn of his genius. Courage is the great secret of his success. He takes the lion by

the mane. He gains all by hazarding all. He throws himself into the breach, and fights his way through as well as he can. He leaves all to his feelings, and goes where they lead him; and he finds his account in this method, and brings rich ventures home."

This portrait of me is perhaps a little too heroic, but, however that may be, it is lucky that the lion expired in his youth having thus neither time nor opportunity to damage or maul his lord and master.

My passion for boxing kindled the passion even of peaceful contemporaries. I frequented prize-rings, and associated with boxers on most friendly terms. At public boxing-matches I played the patron and was called upon to referee. The ring was cleared, the fight began; skill and boxing ability were cheered, falls were received with groans, and the fighters pounded each other's faces out of the semblance to humanity, whilst the admirer of their skill and speed, Edmund Kean, looked on in high glee.

And here is a challenge to all opponents of boxing, to those who see in it nothing but a brutal row when in reality quick thinking, shrewd foresight, splendidly quick and eager footwork and the presence of mind of calculating stylists is of first-rate importance. Not brute force, indeed, but splendid courage, perseverance, the elasticity of a master-dancer only can lead to victory in this manly sport.

Two pugilists, known as Mendoza and Richmond the Black, nice chaps, though not particular in their cajolery, were my intimates. I boxed with them in my dining-room and especially the negro, a short, sturdy fighter and favourite with the crowd, turned out to be an excellent instructor for me. We grappled for body punching. The alert sharpness in his eyes told of recklessness restrained by prudence.

Mendoza was a shaggy, tough-looking man, a body puncher of terrific power. Usually three or four long slashes to the body were followed by a straight right swing he landed to the jaw of his contestant.

It was a glee to see these two experts of boxing, just about at their zenith, standing in close to one another and hitting with a succession of punches and counter-punches to the head and body of each other. Bang—bang! Beautiful straight lefts and right swings, a good lot of solid slogging, right and left, right and left, round after round, until Mendoza sinks to his knees, absolutely groggy, and Richmond the Black, like a tiger, in a most amazing fashion becomes the winner on points. Very clever, indeed!



KEAN AS RICHARD III (ACT IV, SCENE 2)
After the painting by John James Halls, 1814



KEAN AS OTHELLO
Drawn and engraved by F. W. Gear

I lived so vividly in this world of fancy that the bouts sometimes were brought to a close in the streets. And thus it even happened that, publicly quarrelling one day with a noted professor of swordcraft, we were lodged in St. Dunstan's watch-house to cool off.

My extravagances with my horse, Shylock, became the talk of the town. Shylock was a steed of first-class pedigree. It had been presented to me by some patron of the drama, and, recollecting my circus-riding, I had tamed and tutored it into a variety of accomplishments. Although the horse was frequently permitted to sleep all day, I, after a performance, still in costume, hot and exhausted, used to jump on it, to gallop through the deserted streets of town and suburbs, along the highroad into the country, like a phantom of the night to the startled country folk, till both horse and rider were tired and bathed in foam, when they returned home at dawn, and slept together in the stable.

Not less persistent was the rumour that I often offended my guests by leaving them suddenly in order to drink and feast in low taverns with questionable companions whom I had preferred as friends; that Lord Essex, the chairman of the Drury Lane committee, had the greatest difficulty in ridding me of the numerous parasites and flatterers who day in and day out crowded my dressing-room; that this same gentleman had even greater difficulties in keeping me away from excessive brandy-drinking.

Certainly the fashion and craze for eccentric and world-weary geniuses played into my hands and encouraged my unbridled licentiousness. The example of Byron kindled in me a responsive flame. But fundamentally it suited my own temperament to break the chains which convention and morality had forged to bind mankind, to shed my bourgeois ego and to play a bewildering variety of roles in my private life.

I was the lion of society as well as the centre of orgies in the underworld. By nature rather shy and unfriendly towards the "golden crest of society", though they received me now with open arms, I snapped my fingers at the rulers of salons and plunged head over heels, as if to spite them, into the dissolute atmosphere of gloomy ale-houses. Oh yes! They were running after me, those lords and ladies. But what did I really care for these people with high-sounding names—Lady Holland, Lady Blessington, Count D'Orsay, Duke of Beaufort, Earl Fitzhardinge, Lord Lennox, Lord Glengall, Sir George Warrender? At times, after having drunk too much good wine, I fell into telling them of my former life, of the tawdry existence in barns and village inns,

of the mummer-plays before cattle drovers and countryfolk, of performances to empty benches. I recited to them, as I had done in those far-off days. Recollecting Saunders' Circus I even turned somersaults; they were as frantically applauded by the lords as in those earlier years by toll-gatherers and horse dealers. Then, I would suddenly awake from my stupor and would notice these distinguished people looking at me in aloof amazement. I fled—to seek consolation in grimy taverns with low company. In a fit of misanthropy and anger I would call out: "A couple of years ago not one of these lords would have deigned to look at the poor stroller; now their admiration is unbounded. Pshaw! Am I to-day a different man from yesterday? By heaven! I prefer an honest glass of wine, an honest talk with you, my friends, a thousandfold to the hypocritical condescension of these aristocratic puppets!"

The only aristocrat to whom I felt genuinely attracted and whose friendship for me meant so much was Byron. I met him for the first time at a dinner-party at Lady Holland's house. Although he was really a member of the Drury Lane committee, he had not taken part in that memorable meeting which, after removal of numerous obstacles, had considered me worthy enough to be presented to the London public as Shylock.

Lord Byron approached me with the captivating charm of his unique and fascinating personality which had caused a sort of "Byron fever" not only in England but throughout the world. So this was the "cripple and Apollo in one person", this the flaming youth with the club-foot, this the demon and seducer, amazingly bold in bearing, riddled with licentiousness and profligacy, armed with aristocratic conceit—and yet capable of devotion found only in women, a fanatic advocate of justice and a flaming torch of liberty, blazing the trail for the oppressed peoples!

"I love you, Kean," he exclaimed impetuously; "perhaps because you are part of my ego. You are brutal, active, heroic. I prefer the talents of action—of war, or the senate, or even of science—to all the speculations of those mere dreamers of another existence of this apathy."

And without waiting for my answer he continued:

"If I live ten years longer, you will see that it is not over with me—I don't mean in literature, for that is nothing."

Maybe he had at that moment already a foreboding of his tragic doom: Greece and his death for liberty!

He beckoned me to a niche where we could converse undis-

turbed. He was familiar with every phase of my Richard, Shylock, and Hamlet. He warned me:

"You cannot expect to maintain your present eminence, or to advance still higher, without the envy of your green-room fellows, or the criticism of their admirers. But if you don't beat them all, why then—merit hath no purchase in 'these costermonger days.' "

And in an enthusiastic mood he exclaimed:

"I wish that I had a talent for the drama; I would write a tragedy now."

The aversion and shyness I instinctively felt with people of his class melted away like the morning mist in the sun. This man's demoniac intensity of living—he was no older than myself—the dissonances in his character, his inclination to solitude turning him to a "solitary hobgoblin", and the fervour and mental extravagance with which he offered himself to mankind, his worldliness which was dragging him down, whilst creating in him at the same time the passionate desire for liberation from the earthbound through art—all these qualities drew me irresistibly towards him and made me a satellite of his dazzling personality.

Our acquaintance soon ripened into intimacy and friendship; the tragedian dined with the poet, was introduced to his friends, and on nights when he did not play accompanied him to his private box at the theatre.

People warned me against the pernicious influence of Byron's friendship. They said that good and evil powers battled to possess him. He was reputed to be a seducer not only in the bodily sense. A seducer of souls who after satiation would throw away the sweet fruit of his passion soon to hunt for new lustful pleasures.

Byron's conception of friendship is clearly stated in his own sceptical words:

"I am quite sure that many of our worst actions and our worst thoughts are caused by friends. An enemy can never do as much injury, or cause as much pain: if he speaks ill of one, it is set down as an exaggeration of malice, and therefore does little harm, and he has no opportunity of telling one any of the disagreeable things that are said in one's absence; but a friend has such an amiable candour in admitting the faults least known, and often unsuspected, and of denying or defending with *acharnement* those that can neither be denied nor defended, that he is sure to do one mischief. Then he thinks himself bound to retail and detail every disagreeable remark or story he hears, and generally under the injunction of secrecy; so that one is tormented without the power of bringing the slanderer to account, unless by a breach of con-

fidence. I am always tempted to exclaim, with Socrates, 'My friends! there are no friends!' when I hear and see the advantages of friendship."

The fact remains that I strove to emulate not only the exterior habits of this unbridled genius, but I also acknowledged an inner enrichment from this brief acquaintance. I am proud of having been considered worthy of the notice and friendship of a Byron, and in view of the slanderous libels levelled on this poet I can only endorse his sentiment laid down in the words: "For my part, it is indifferent to me what the world says or thinks of me. Let them know me in my books!"

What Byron feared and detested most was people's pity for him—pity for his physical deformity—pity for his conflict-stricken, anguished soul. In this he resembled Richard III, who preferred to be dubbed a criminal rather than to serve as an everlasting target for commiseration.

Reckless, restless, adventurous, intemperate, brain-fevered by success, desperate in reverse—all these were qualities attributed to the great actor Napoleon Bonaparte, which, however, could be assigned to Byron as well. (I hardly dare to admit that for me they were the decisive and subconscious reason of my liking for Byron, the man!)

But it is beyond all doubt that it was the strong resemblance and affinity that I felt between us which drew me so forcibly to the poet. "His character was a labyrinth, but the clue to his heart could be found by none," judges Lady Byron; she confirms only what Byron says playfully about himself, "This strange *mélange* of good and evil!" Or what the fairy announces about Manfred:

"I know thee for a man of many thoughts,
And deeds of good and ill, extreme in both."

My wife too was drawn into the whirl of society life. Although it really was a great trial to her she bore it with pleasure and delight. She conducted herself in a dignified and gracious manner, modelling herself on the manners of her late employers in whose fine homes she herself as governess had played a minor part. But my lack of discipline troubled her. I could and would not adjust myself to the duties and obligations of this new life and surroundings. She exerted herself to the utmost to give to the rough diamond, as she called me, the brilliant polish of high society. Soon, however, she was to learn that no disciplinarian in the world could transform the gipsy into a correct town gentleman. So she gave up the struggle.

In January 1816 another great success came to me which put all previous triumphs into the shade. My characterization of Sir Giles Overreach in Massinger's *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* was the talk of the town. The last scene, in particular, was according to the *Morning Chronicle*:

"A climax of terrible destruction and awful desolation of a mind buoyed up by false hopes, the failure of which overwhelms it in blank desperation and universal wretchedness."

Hazlitt, in *The Examiner*, wrote:

"We cannot conceive of any one's doing Mr. Kean's part of Sir Giles Overreach so well as himself. We have seen others in the part, superior in the look and costume; but in the soul and spirit, no one equal to him. He is a truly great actor. This is one of his very best parts. He was not at a single fault. The conclusion was quite overwhelming."

I invariably used to play the part of Sir Giles Overreach with a kind of artistic voluptuousness. I knew it gave me, as scarcely any other part could, the opportunity to stir the public profoundly.

With flying hair and deeply lined forehead, abysmal horror in my eyes, I stood before the agitated audience and lived through the last phase in the life of a fantastic and insatiable usurer:

"... Ha! what are these? sure, hangmen,
That come to bind my hands, and then to drag me
Before the judgment-seat: now they are new shapes,
And do appear like Furies, with steel whips
To scourge my ulcerous soul. Shall I then fall
Ingloriously, and yield? no, spite of Fate,
Though you were legions of accursed spirits,
Thus would I fly among you. . . ."

With a wild and flaming fierceness I played the terrible outbreak of madness that only ended in the subjugation of a poor, broken mind.

There are moments in the actor's life when his art is balanced as on a knife-edge. On one side creative art, on the other chaos. But who would dare to draw the invisible line of demarcation? Here creativeness, there self-annihilation.

The madness of my Sir Giles Overreach was such a moment. Mrs. Glover who was acting with me, overcome by the hopeless horror reflected in my face, fainted on the open stage. Byron, seated in his box, had a violent attack of cramp. Women in the auditorium succumbed to hysteria, whilst the house, full to breaking point, applauded my performance with wild ecstasy.

“Without doubt the most terrific exhibition of human passion that has been witnessed upon the modern stage.” A critic of my performance on the following day. My Sir Giles Overreach became the sensation of all London and the subsequent repeat-performances saw people fighting for seats.

CHAPTER XII

A COMPULSORY PART

I FEEL the time has come to speak also of the reverse side of the medal. The career of a celebrated darling of the public is usually considered flawless by the sensation-hungry people. I have already indicated that behind my brilliant successes lurked a dark power ready to destroy me. Not that it stepped out of the wings with clumsy and brutal force to slay me. Fate prefers to work with careful calculation. She glories in her power to make us believe that a hostile force is barring our way to success, whilst in reality, as I found out too late—alas! the enemy lies within ourselves and feeds on our life-blood.

In March 1816, a little incident occurred that, though unimportant in itself, should have compelled me to stop and think. It is significant, however, of my state of mind at that time that not only did I make light of the consequences in a masterful manner, but I continued my mode of life as before, thus endangering body and soul.

A repeat-performance of Massinger's *The Duke of Milan* had been fixed for the 26th of March at Drury Lane. In the morning of the same day I had accepted an invitation to luncheon from some influential friends and patrons at Deptford. Merrily I drove there in my own carriage drawn by four magnificent chestnuts. The opulent repast was of an unduly long duration. Wine and champagne were plied diligently and made the time pass more rapidly than usual. When therefore one of the guests looked at his watch he realized in dismay that it would be impossible for me to return to London in time for the performance, quite apart from the fact that too much wine had affected me to such an extent that I could hardly have played even the smallest part.

What was to be done for the best? My friends, knowing too well the strict rules of punctuality and discharge of duty in the theatre, tried to think of a way out. Finally they invented the following story: Kean's horses had shied at some geese crossing the road near the inn. This had caused the carriage to overturn. Kean, in his fall, had dislocated his collarbone and was now confined to bed at the inn in great pain. Thus instructed, my coachman was sent post haste to London to report the regrettable accident to the management of Drury Lane.

Meanwhile the public had taken their seats in the theatre. But

when the curtain was about to rise the callboy noticed with horror that I had failed to appear. Messengers were sent to my house, also to the tavern where I used to tone myself up for the performance. As they could not find me anywhere, nothing was left to them but to announce my absence and to propose the performance of another play.

The greatly disappointed audience refused this offer. The actor Rae stepped in front of the curtain to ascertain their wishes; a chorus of voices met him with shouts of: "Wait! Wait!"

To amuse and divert the audience the orchestra played "God Save the King" and other music; another half-hour went by, no sign of Kean. At last they had to put on another play. This substitute was received with ill humour by the public. When, as usual at the end of the performance, an actor appeared in front of the curtain to announce the next production the audience booed and shouted angrily: "Kean! Where is Kean?"

Late in the evening, finally, the coachman had reached Drury Lane to tell them of my unfortunate accident. The London newspapers were immediately informed. Perusing their usual morning paper next day people learnt in a lengthy report, made even lengthier by the deliberate journalistic adornments, of the rather dangerous mishap that had befallen their favourite.

Among those who heard of my adventure in that way was also Mary. Full of anxiety she at once summoned a surgeon and two fellow actors to hurry to my aid.

In the meantime I had awakened from a heavy drunken sleep. My astonished glances took in the strange room, the four-poster bed on which I lay booted and fully clothed, the flustered faces of my companions standing by. What had occurred? I was told: I had disloyally failed to return to Drury Lane the night before. Willy-nilly I had now to play the part of a patient. My shoulder and arm were carefully bandaged by the local chemist; my face was heavily powdered to assume pallor. On their arrival at the inn Mary and my colleagues found me in bed deathly white, in a room with all the window-curtains drawn. Not only did I feign fatigue, refuse examination by the surgeon, but I insisted, with the obstinacy of an invalid, on my being taken to London without delay. Although the surgeon shook his head in disapproval, they had to yield to the wishes of the injured. With tender care I was tucked in with rugs and cushions, and, provided with numerous precautionary measures, carried to my London home. Having arrived there and having been put to bed I remarked with an air of great exhaustion that the presence of so many sympathizers was

extremely disturbing to me. At last left alone with Mary and feeling secure from detection, I suddenly, to her horror, jumped out of bed, and tore the bandages from my limbs. Gaily laughing, I enlightened her about the real circumstances.

To preserve the illusion I had to stay away from the theatre for a few days. I have to confess, however, that I suffered more from this enforced leisure than from an uneasy conscience. The distrust of the public had to be assuaged; I therefore addressed a letter to the management of Drury Lane which was promptly published by the newspapers:

"Gentlemen,

"I beg you to accept, and convey to the Committee, my sincere thanks for the interest so kindly expressed for my recovery, and for the liberality with which I am desired not to hasten the resumptions of my duties before my health is perfectly re-established. I am authorized by my surgeon to entertain hopes of being able to appear before the public on Monday, if it be not in a character requiring too great bodily exertion. With that view I take the liberty of suggesting that of Shylock. I beg to assure you that I feel convinced that anxiety and impatience of confinement will tend more to delay my perfect recovery from my accident than any ill that may result from too early exertion.

"I am, Sirs, your obedient servant,

E. KEAN"

In spite of all these precautions it was unavoidable that the real cause of my non-appearance leaked out and roused the public to anger. When I appeared again for the first time in the part of Shylock Drury Lane was crowded to capacity by an audience that resembled a swarm of bees humming and buzzing noisily.

After the usual overture the play was about to begin. All of a sudden from the darkness of the auditorium voices were heard:

"Stop! stop! Kean shall apologize!"

The actors were standing helpless on the stage; the disturbance among the audience grew more noticeable. At that moment the Duke of Gloucester and Princess Sophia entered their box. The audience rose to their feet and intoned the National Anthem. When they had resumed their seats the atmosphere had sufficiently calmed down to presume that the performance would take its usual course. But as soon as Bassanio and Antonio appeared and began to speak, hostile voices were heard again:

"Stop! stop!"

My sympathizers offered resistance in my defence:

"Go on! Go on!"

"Kean must apologize first!"

"He need not apologize!"

Despite this disturbance the play went on. In due course I appeared in the mask and costume of the Venetian Jew.

The reception was exceedingly turbulent.

"Kean must apologize!"

"Need not apologize!"

Hissing and whistling; clapping and shouts of bravo from the two hostile parties in the auditorium.

I was determined not to be put out by this unfriendly reception. Undeterred I spoke my lines; not a word of which could be heard in the general tumult.

Finally I found myself compelled to break off the dialogue and to step before the footlights. I did so fearlessly, without moving a muscle. This seemed to impress the shouters in the stalls and circles; they stopped their infernal noise almost immediately.

With a firm, clear voice I addressed them stressing every word:

"It is the first time in my life that I have been the unwilling cause of disappointment. That in this theatre it is the first instance out of the two hundred and sixty-nine performances, I appeal to your own recollection and to the testimony of the managers. It is to your favour I owe whatever reputation I enjoy. It is upon your candour I throw myself when prejudice would deprive me of what you have bestowed!"

Those who had expected an apology or a timid palliation of my offence must needs have been disappointed by this short address. But I was so sure of the compelling effect of my glances and the firmness of my bearing that I had no need to shelter behind the penitent "Pater peccavi". The success of my offensive confirmed the correctness of my tactics. I succeeded in silencing my foes and stirring the entire audience to riotous enthusiasm.

I had conquered—conquered for the moment. The history of my career will show whether it was only a Pyrrhic victory.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SUN REACHES ITS ZENITH

THE following years found me, to all appearance, at the summit of my success. Not only London but all England, Scotland and Ireland vied with each other to pay homage to me as artist and man. In writing these memoirs I try to strip off the vanity and stupid pride which blinded my eyes, and to scrutinize my past with incorruptible veracity. I know now that the fame and glamour of those "Master years" were only the outer garments of a poor little man suffering from the weaknesses and shortcomings of mankind. I also know that the apparently healthy tree so universally admired and acclaimed was rotten at the core and destined to swift decay.

Perhaps it is the fate of the actor to submerge his personality in the multitude of his disguises. He who sees in every episode the germ of a new part, he who gets into the skin of a character, however fictitious, shedding his own with delight; he who, with fatal facility, can change his ego into a multiple of egos must needs become a prey to self-estrangement. He lives on the extreme edge of a precipice whose ghostly depths beckon him to self-annihilation.

I was afraid of being alone with myself; an ever-increasing dread came over me when faced with, what seemed to me like a yawning abyss, the futile and meaningless interval between my performances. I frittered away my health in nocturnal feasts over wine and strong spirits with boxers, wrestlers, habitual drunkards and women of doubtful fame.

I was a lonely man. No success, no triumph could blind me to this fact.

There were friends, it is true, who strove to drag me away from the precipice I was visibly approaching. One of them was that acquaintance from the time of my strolling days who once more crossed my path, the officer Grattan, an honest and upright man, whom as an obscure player I had instructed in fencing. Lord Byron too foresaw that only a miracle could prevent me coming to a bad end. He, however, was like myself a "flame in the wind"; he lacked the strength that could have held a drowning man above water. Besides, in spring 1816, he turned his back on England for ever, leaving me to the turbulence of my passions.

Grattan, with all his manliness and loyalty did not possess sufficient authority over me to change my life fundamentally.

To-day, at the end of my pilgrimage, I see my innate qualities in their true colours. I see them, as it were, with the keenness of an actor studying his model or even his own play of features before the mirror. The Edmund Kean of those years stands before me; a whirlwind of passions, yet a child naïve and chockful of conceit, the lion of salons, a man of strong emotions, a usurper, a despot, surrounded by club members of "The Wolves" as by a guard of Prætorians; and yet a man solitary in his grandeur, shrinking from the conventions of society, fatigued and nauseated by the hollow glamour of constantly repeated successes.

A man's reputation is a label invented by a work-a-day world according to its needs. It makes use of established truths and fantastic adornments. Gossip does not concern herself with reticence or pedantic correctness when dealing with an actor's reputation. My life became a myth, confounding even myself. I played with it as with a part. I saw myself in the footlights when standing in a salon, when seeking recreation in the country, even while my hair was being curled by the coiffeur. The grandeur of my mode of living was the bright setting for my performance. The virtues credited to me—manliness, chivalry, kindness to former colleagues, daring frankness and a sincerity averse to all conventions—nurtured in me the conviction that here was a man, triumphantly successful, superior to his enemies, equal to all adversities, full of strength and boundless lust for life. In reality, alas, this same man was nearing step by step his dark and sinister doom.

But these things I only recognize now, as I glance backward, stripping the past of all its trappings and seeing as with clair-voyant vision the naked man powerless now to take refuge behind his many disguises.

In those years I was like a ship in full sail carelessly racing through the waves of life; difficulties stimulated me; I brushed them aside with a charming bravado.

The kindness to my former comrades did not spring from a feeling of vanity or a desire to show off; I was benevolent because I was successful, victorious, because I felt secure and satisfied.

It happened quite frequently that I jumped into the breach to help impoverished actors and managers. My appearance was enough to fill the theatre and benefit them materially. In the tavern "The Harp" I foregathered with my friends of the open road, the tight-rope walkers, circus riders and vagabonds who had shared years of starvation with me. They clung to me with dog-

like faithfulness; I returned their devotion by equal affection and loyalty.

Have I ever denied that I was a bully? I have always spoken my mind. My temperament had the tautness of a crossbow which lets fly the arrow by the merest vibration. In this respect numerous stories about me were circulated. I shall here recount only one of them.

A man, Higman by name, who had been a bass singer in his early days, was landlord of a tavern in Villiers Street called "Richard the Third". To this place flocked singers, actors and musicians; informal, merry and high-spirited folk. Needless to say, I also found my way there, quite often to change night into day, drinking and singing gaily with these boon companions. One evening Fuller, the mimic, regaled us with impersonations of well-known actors such as Bannister, Kemble and many others; he took off their weaknesses and human frailties excellently.

I had been plying the bottle almost too diligently and let these portraits silently pass before me without any sign of pleasure or displeasure. But when my turn came for being caricatured—Fuller gave a mock-interpretation of my Richard III—my face darkened visibly. When Fuller proceeded more boldly to exaggerate the real or supposed weaknesses of my acting to the amusement of his audience, without showing any emotion, I threw the contents of my glass into his face.

Tumult ensued; shrieking, turning over of chairs and tables. It was a veritable wrestling match between Fuller and me, which would have degenerated into acts of violence had not some guests and the landlord separated us and removed Fuller to safety.

I returned to my table and ordered another drink as if nothing had happened. Friends and flatterers soon gathered round me singing my praises and lauding my all-round superiority. I waved these cheap flatteries aside and said in a raucous voice:

"I vow I'll hang myself on the nearest tree, if I really cut such a poor figure of an actor as Fuller makes me out to be!"

Renewed flatteries and cheers added to my drunken egotism.

You will always find side by side with an actor's artistic maturity an extreme lack of self-criticism. Alas, would that we were strong enough not to lose sight of ourselves in days of good fortune and success! But self-aggrandisement and the tendency to flaunt oneself on buskins cannot pass unpunished. What I understood was simply this: "Kean, you have again acted your part brilliantly!" That the fountain of my God-given talent was in danger of drying up, that I was on the point of becoming stagnant through my

fame, were facts that did not penetrate my consciousness, could not penetrate it, because we only recognize our fate when we have become victims.

Here I should like to interpolate a few words about my method of working as well as about my various critics.

Numerous theatre-goers maintain that I let myself be guided blindly by impulse. There is hardly an actor alive who is not subject to changes of moods; he can't possibly be the same night after night. And I, presumably a person of sanguine temperament, more than any other person am dependent on the moment's humour. It is extremely erroneous to suppose that the realism of my acting was based solely on improvisations. Not in the least—it was my practice to rehearse scene by scene to my wife, and to repeat a speech twenty times, until we were satisfied that it had hit the true vein.

It has been always somewhat mysterious to me why the public seems frequently in the dark about the work of an actor. True, it is hardly their task to puzzle their heads about such technical matters; they are out to enjoy the artistic accomplishment as a whole, just as a layman seldom wishes to take to pieces and examine in minutest detail some mechanism which renders him good service.

On the other hand, however, I should expect that a critic should give not merely his verdict but that, along with the aesthetic values of the artistic performance, he should be keenly aware of the process of its creation.

Hazlitt fully realized this when he writes:

“Mr. Kean's style of acting is not in the least of the unpremeditated, improvisatory kind: it is throughout elaborate and systematic, instead of being loose, off-hand, and accidental.”

But in general I must admit: These people don't understand their business. They give me credit where I make no effort to deserve praise, and pass over passages on which I have bestowed the utmost care and attention. They think because my style is new, and appears natural, that I never study; and talk about the sudden impulse of genius. With genuine artists there is no such thing as impulsive acting; all is arranged beforehand; else, why should we rehearse? We may act better or worse on a particular night, from particular circumstances, but the conception is the same. I have done all these things a thousand times in country theatres, and perhaps better, before I was recognized as a great actor, and have been loudly applauded; but the sound in those days never reached as far as London.

Of all critics it was William Hazlitt in particular who passionately broke a lance for my art, may be that, in the battle that he waged against John Philip Kemble and his declamatory style, he saw in me the champion of a new school of acting; may be that he himself was an intrepid fighter and not unlike myself, a full man, and a good hater. His brilliancy of attack, his desperate defence are rarely to be found. In the criticism of politics, of letters, of acting, there is none like him.

Dark-eyed and dark-haired, slim in figure, rather slovenly in his habit, he still lives on in my memory, although he died in 1830, an eloquent face with sparkling eyes. A prince of pugilists!

I ungrudgingly submitted to Hazlitt's criticism even if it happened to be negative. I considered it always stupid in the extreme to fight against an unfavourable verdict, as long as it proved to be a creative one, that is as long as it supplied the actor with food for thought and left him with some useful hints that goaded him on to greater efforts. Critical pinpricks may often wound the actor but may also stimulate him to finer acting, may even madden him till he has found the road to new artistic achievements.

I'll put here on record that London critics were by no means unanimous in praise of my *Othello*, in connection with which I should like to recount a little story, an amusing comment of actor-critic.

Mrs. Garrick, David Garrick's widow, on calling one morning, after the reviews of my *Othello* had reached me, found me in a state of excitement. I received her abruptly, and retired quickly, conduct which much astonished the old lady, who, turning to my wife, inquired what was the matter with me.

"Oh," replied Mary, "you mustn't mind him; he has just read a spiteful notice of his *Othello* in one of the newspapers, which has terribly vexed him."

"But why should he mind that?" asked Mrs. Garrick; "he is above the papers, and can afford to be abused."

"Yes," replied Mary, "but he says the article is so well written; but for that, he wouldn't care for the abuse."

"Then, my dear," said Mrs. Garrick, soothingly, "he should do as Garrick did, and he would be spared this annoyance."

"What's that?" said Mary anxiously, hoping her husband might follow the great man's example.

"Write the articles himself; Garrick always did! . . ."

On the other hand my anger at the injustices and caprices of the critics was soon forgotten over a statement or compliment paid by such celebrities as Byron or Sheridan.

With gratitude I register Byron's criticism: "When Kean is blamed for want of dignity, we should remember that dignity is a grace, and not an art, and not to be attained by study. In all but supernatural parts he is perfect; even his very defects belong, or seem to belong, to the parts themselves, and appear truer to nature."

As to Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the day of whose brilliant life was now drawing towards its night, I should like to report the following anecdote:

Hearing much of my Othello, he was anxious to see my performance; but, owing to some offence received from the managing committee of Drury Lane, he had vowed never to set his foot within the theatre. Therefore, by a mutual friend his desire was conveyed to me, with a request that I should favour him by reading him some passages from the play. To his suggestion I assented with pleasure, and calling upon him, I found the famous author of the *School for Scandal* lying on a sofa in a room badly despoiled of its furniture by the brokers. His face was sickly and sad, his figure worn by illness and dissipation. I read him the chief scenes from Othello, at which those wonderful grey eyes that had once sparkled with wit grew bright once more, and anon were dimmed with tears. At the conclusion Sheridan thanked me heartily—he was poor in all save thanks.

It was our only meeting. Leaving him I had no premonition that Sheridan would be dead within two months' time.

It was now 1817. A young actor, Junius Brutus Booth by name, appeared at Covent Garden, and his name seemed to be on everybody's lips. It was generally agreed that he was astonishingly like me in build and voice. The management recognizing this proclaimed their new discovery as a "great star". The crowd thronging Covent Garden was living up to its reputation in its hunger for sensation. This Junius Brutus Booth had a phenomenal success as Richard III. When soon after he fell out with the management about his salary, I, without hesitation, advised the committee of Drury Lane to invite him to give a guest-performance side by side with me.

This chivalrous gesture was received with favour by the London public. It proved to be a trump card, because the ensuing performance outshone the success of Covent Garden. Excellent food for the novelty-hunters it promised Drury Lane unparalleled box-office takings.

On 20th February 1817 we played together in *Othello*. As on

previous occasions, I played the Moor whilst Booth was to challenge my art in the part of Iago.

The evening meant to the public obviously a kind of boxing match to be watched with keen interest. To me it was a play within a play, facing my double and rendering him *hors de combat*, if at all possible.

I should not like to count among my great successes that the public decided in my favour that night. Neither would I have it said that the celebrated Kean immensely enjoyed this game of cat and mouse. Perhaps I did see my youthful rival during the first few scenes of the play as the defenceless mouse; later, however, in the course of the play—I must confess to my credit and that of young Booth—the magic of Shakespeare's poetry gripped us with such potency that we forgot personal rivalry and faced each other just as Othello and Iago. It was an exhilarating wrestle according to all rules of the game; my heart rejoiced when I realized that there stood opposite me in this Iago a gifted rascal and witty devil.

I recognized that this double, provided for me by nature, was in every respect worthy of being reckoned with as an equal. The audience, in the end, decided in favour of the suffering, the deep love, the jealousy and madness of Othello, leaving the villain Iago in the cold. It was a great, although not unqualified satisfaction to me. I realized what it entails to be the darling of a public. I had won the contest, but had it been otherwise their disappointment would have been unbounded.

Hazlitt obviously was of the opinion of the public when writing:

"In fact, Mr. Booth's Iago was a very close and spirited repetition of Mr. Kean's manner of doing that part. It was indeed the most spirited copy we ever saw upon the stage, considering at the same time the scrupulous exactness with which he adhered to his model in the most trifling minutiae."

Junius Brutus Booth could not easily forgive the audience for their obvious partiality. It seemed to him like a blow in the face. His instinct told him that at a theatre where an Edmund Kean ruled supreme he would have to play only second fiddle, a bitter pill to a man hungry for applause. Without delay he therefore decided to turn his back on this inhospitable institute and to offer his service once more to Covent Garden, the cradle of his triumphs.

I should like to mention also another encounter which was not only a casual meeting but homage paid to each other by votaries of the drama in different countries. In the course of years the name Edmund Kean had become famous also on the continent.

When in summer 1818 I spent some of my holidays in France and Talma learnt of my stay in Paris, it was a gracious though natural gesture that he, the greatest French actor of his time, should invite the English colleague to his home.

I need not emphasize the fact that these two actors, each representative of his country and particular art met with the same elaborate ceremonial as two potentates who, with the usual kiss on both cheeks, confirm the friendly relationship of their governments and peoples. It was the easiest thing in the world to these expert actors to perform this official act of greeting in a grand and solemn style. Life is ever a stage on which we play our parts. And the criticism of the world round us fires us to give of our best.

Disappointment was in store if one looked forward to Talma as a typical Frenchman, lively, gesticulating and full of sparkling conversation and to Kean as the typical Englishman, stoic, phlegmatic and on his dignity. Just the opposite was the case.

Talma, the representative of the classics, was of noble stature, noble language, wisely restrained in body and mind; his whole person exhaled serenity. His speech, his facial expression testified to the equanimity and superiority of his artistic maturity. His gait was measured, his word wary, his smile reserved, subdued the sparkle of his eye. He insisted on punctilious preciseness in his appearance as well as on scrupulous order in the realm of thought. A true Latin whose intellect never admitted unfettered intuition. I know he must have smiled indulgently at the carelessly groomed little Englishman with his untidy black locks, unsteady eyes and his amazing gesticulations.

This Kean—he very likely thought—is a volcano. He is unable to control himself. His nature is primitive; he is incalculable. No limits can be set to his extravagant imagination. *Ma foi!* he never will break his neck conforming to the laws of artistic restraint or decorum.

We were fundamentally different and had little to say to each other. But it was characteristic of the wise diplomacy of the great Frenchman that, when asked by friends as to the impression my person made on him, he is said to have answered with a smile and temperate admiration: "Kean is a magnificent uncut gem; polish and round him off and he will be a perfect tragedian."

I take the liberty of guessing and expressing the complacent thought that probably crossed his mind: "A dynamic creature such as Edmund Kean will never in his life find the noble equanimity that distinguishes me, François Joseph Talma, from all contemporary actors; that noble balance of mind which is the

first and foremost condition for artistic finish and perfect poise in acting."

I heaved a sigh of relief when I reached home again. No doubt, my visit to France had put me, as representative of the English stage, in a new light. Yet I felt involuntarily that there will always exist national limitations. Ruminating in this way, I, on my part, had to smile at Talma's well-studied pose of grandeur, and at the academic staginess of the French school which could never be brought into harmony with the chaotic and crowded life so essential to my art.

There is only one London, I said to myself and felt happy at the thought. I revelled in the privileged position I occupied in the world of drama in my home-country. All that I could have ever wished for was within my reach. The love of the public, the esteem of authoritative critics supported my exalted, almost unrivalled position. The fireworks of my passion, the accuracy of my histrionic instinct—privileges granted by public and press—sufficed to keep the London from which my audiences were drawn in constant commotion.

I had truly reached the summit of my career. I could have rejoiced calmly in the bliss of perfect safety, had I not recognized that, unavoidably, every peak also was the beginning of descent, which thought aroused in me a depression not to be overcome even by forced vitality.

Added to this process in my subconscious mind other events came to pass which should have served me as a warning. The mere fact that my repertoire, extensive as it may appear, was exhausting itself, in time constituted a real danger.

Could one blame the playgoer if his interest became blunted in my Shylock, Richard III, Othello, Macbeth or Hamlet, repeated year after year at Drury Lane?

Time and again I have questioned myself whether I was responsible for the alarming shrinkage of the box-office takings at Drury Lane, which fell from £80,000 in the first year of my appearance to £50,000 in the fourth year. I refuse to accept this responsibility. I do not consider it a punishable crime to have overlooked the fact that an audience grown too familiar with the tone of voice, movement and facial expression of their favourite actor must necessarily in time detract from his glamour with their dulled receptivity. To-day I know: it is the tragedy of a celebrated actor in the first rank that in the long run the secret of his attraction cannot stand up to the storming interest of his admirers. The

surfeited public, with brutal ardour for new discoveries, turns to other rising stars.

The unpleasant fact remained that the theatre of Garrick's triumphs and my own was again faced with great difficulties and was struggling for mere existence as at the time when I emerged from the obscurity of my wandering life.

But when, to crown it all, Stephen Kemble, a brother of the tragedian John Philip, became business manager of Drury Lane and proved only too soon that he was utterly unsuited to the post, I decided to appear only from time to time on the London stage. I preferred to renew my London successes by touring through Great Britain, and "reaping a golden harvest" in the country.

Friends deemed it their duty to point out to me the disadvantages of such wandering life. What was uppermost in their minds was the danger of frittering away my talents, of risking my health with lack of comforts and wearing myself out on tiring journeys. I, personally, was indifferent to such dangers and heeded not their well-meant counsel. The warnings of these good friends were lost on me; my histrionic instinct was too strong; my appetite and yearning for power and glory stifled cool deliberation. Perhaps also, because I could and would not refuse the remunerative offers of actor-managers and producers. Unquestionably I brought this fate on myself; I paved the way from glory to despair.

The glamour of the "famous guest-actor" still clung to me. My tours resembled the triumphal procession of a hero through conquered provinces. Without the clash of swords, without vanquishing a hostile force I entered towns amidst the cheering of crowds. Flatterers and sycophants were my constant companions who, with their empty words, urged me to be satisfied with my old style of acting instead of exploring new and untrodden ways in my art. Fame became my armour; the armour became a prison; in it I guarded my art from the influences of healthy competition; thus yielding to a destiny which put the better part of myself out of action.

This was my crime; this the germ of my later breakdown. Yet I had no premonition of this force growing within me and threatening to destroy me. I basked in the applause of my admirers, in the mock-criticism of provincial would-be-journalists, in the worship of enthusiastic dilettanti and in the detestable servility of my colleagues.

Stephen Kemble had to announce the bankruptcy of Drury Lane. They approached me with the question: Was I not the only one capable of refloating the stranded ship? The venture to seize

the reins, to be my own manager tempted my spirit of enterprise. So I addressed the secretary of Drury Lane Theatre:

"I have received the conditions of the sub-committee, which nothing but madness could have dictated, or folly induce a man to read a second time. These are my proposals—I offer £8,000 per annum, for the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, and its appurtenances, scenery, dresses, chandeliers, books, etc., etc. In a word, I shut my doors against all committees, expecting an immediate surrender of their keys and all privileges in possession. I select my own officers, my own performers, 'my reason's in my will'; and can only be accountable to the proprietors for payment of the rent, and to the public for their amusements. This is my offer—if they like it, so: if not, farewell. Read this aloud to the proprietors, and as much in earnest as I write it.

E. KEAN"

But finally, Robert William Elliston, "the Napoleon of the Stage", my former adversary, emerged victorious from the competition. I therefore withdrew from the arena, a disappointed man.

It is true, Elliston did his utmost to interest me in his theatre. But when he wrote me one day, "I shall think it no degradation to play Cassio to your Othello," I replied to him in a somewhat satirical strain:

"Sir,

"I congratulate yourself and the public on your accession to the diadem of Drury Lane, wearied and disgusted as all sensible people must have been with the stultified dynasty of the last two seasons. The lovers of the drama will hail with rapture a minister to their amusements so transcendent in his art and so mature in experience as Robert William Elliston. With regard to myself, I expressed my determination at the close of the last season to leave England. My arrangements are made. *Cras ingens iterabimus aequor*—I quit the Kingdom! This has not been kept a secret. On my return I may treat with you; but it will not be consonant with my feelings to act in any theatre where I have not the full appropriation of my own talents. But I shall allow the field open to my compeers, and heartily wish success to all aspirants—this for the sake of the drama, which should be immortal. I have prepared Mrs. Kean to answer any inquiries that may be necessary in my absence. Richards and Hamlets grow on every hedge. Grant you may have a good crop.

"Yours,

E. KEAN"

"P.S. If I should go by water to the nether world, I shall certainly relate to our great master, you thought it no degradation to act his Cassio."

Nevertheless, the persuasive powers of Elliston, this astute and cunning man of the stage, were such that eventually he succeeded in getting me to sign the contract for a new engagement at his theatre.

London saw me once more and welcomed me warmly for old times' sake. To be true, I even attempted the new part of Coriolanus, but—it must be admitted—failed. Shortly afterwards I acted King Lear; and Elliston resolved to bring out the work with all the melodramatic display the tragedy would by the fullest licence admit. To the production of the storm scene his ingenuity was particularly directed. For him the hurricane became the climax of the play. He had erected trees which swayed backwards and forwards with a creaking sound, the boughs of each having separate leaves that rustled in the wind. Every machine in the theatre capable of spitting fire, spouting rain, or bellowing thunder was pressed into service. The result on the first night was not all the judicious could desire. The noise of this stage storm was overwhelming—for the carpenters and scene-shifters, each working his sheet of thunder or his rain-box, together with the creaking boughs and rustling leaves, caused such confusion that no word the dethroned monarch spoke could be heard, and the tempest was subdued on the following night by general request.

I did not repeat the character very frequently; moreover, I realized that onesided repetition of my Shakespeare parts does not make for progress; that the machine must necessarily run down, unless ways and means are found to feed it.

This trend of thought and the desire of conquering no less than the world made me definitely decide to leave England and to transplant my art to America. The London public gave me the most wonderful send-off. It lent strength to my conviction that I was one of God's chosen; it deepened also my intense affection for my people and homeland.

CHAPTER XIV

AMERICA

ALAS! Nobody can escape his doom. I left England because I sensed danger hanging over me there. Fortunately that gruesome feeling forsook me in America, the new field of my artistic activity. Looking down the years on my career, I realize that America dealt me as many nasty blows as England. Yet I put foot on that foreign shore full of triumphant optimism and was in no wise surprised when the same applause greeted me that, at my last performance in London, had made me feel so sad at leaving.

The young, unspoilt public of the New World, although eager for good plays, had hitherto to be satisfied with the leavings of Europe. My visit, therefore, caused a sensation. The public, still accustomed to the resounding bombast of academic stylists pricked up their ears, when, during my first performance at the Anthony Street Theatre, New York, they saw that I avoided the pomposity of the Kemble school and, without indulging in petty details, had replaced it with a bold realism. One performance was enough to convert these New Yorkers into fervent adherents of the new school of acting.

The anxiety to witness my acting had, it seems, caused such a ferment amongst the citizens of New York, that the managers of the New York theatre put forth an announcement:

"To prevent the riotous scenes which have disturbed the peace of the town in the vicinity of the theatre, for several days and nights past, in efforts to forestall tickets, the managers have directed that the box-tickets of the whole lower tier, and fourteen of the second row next to the stage, shall be sold by public auction, the premiums for the choice to be appropriated to the Massachusetts General Hospital."

Upon the first day's auction, upwards of eighteen dollars were paid for the choice of a single box, containing nine persons; and on the second day's auction, the total sum paid for the choice of the seats, for one night, amounted to four hundred dollars and fifty cents.

The American critics, more reserved than the general public, admitted that I fully lived up to their anticipations. The report of the New York *Evening Post* for instance, writing of my perform-

ance of Richard III, gives a clear picture of how cool and sceptic minds surrendered to my art:

"We had the pleasure last evening, of being one of a crowded audience to greet the entrance of Mr. Kean, on the American boards, and never did we witness a warmer reception, which was returned in the most grateful and graceful manner. No actor, perhaps, has ever appeared in New York with such prepossessions in his favour, or such prejudices to encounter, and we candidly confess, we were among the number of those who entertained the latter. We were assured that certain imitations of him were exact likenesses; and that certain actors were good copies; that his excellences consisted in sudden starts, frequent and unexpected pauses, in short, a complete knowledge of what is called stage trick, which we hold in contempt. But he had not finished his soliloquy, before our prejudices gave way, and we saw the most complete actor, in our judgment, that ever appeared on our boards. The imitations we had seen, were indeed likenesses, but it was the resemblance of copper to gold; and the copies no more like Kean 'than I to Hercules'."

At the end of my New York appearance the criticisms confirmed the completeness of my break-away from traditions. The *National Advocate* wrote:

"Instead of a cold, we have a vivid conception of character; instead of a lofty, studied style of declamation, we have all the transitions of nature and all the force of reality. In others we see the actor, in Kean we have the man; others describe the passions, Kean feels them; his style not only pleases from its novelty but from the truth."

Naturally there remained even now a little coterie of unswerving adherents to the classic style of acting who set their faces against the realism of my representation and who lamented the passing tradition. Justice and truth demand that I should quote as well their adverse criticism. *The Knickerbocker* wrote:

"From the celebrity which Mr. Kean has attained in New York, by means of his apoplectic voice, ungraceful action, diminutive figure and hysteric cough, one might expect, that if a dumb, clumsy, dwarfish idiot should make his appearance on our boards, he would certainly reach the very pinnacle of fame."

It was a sharp thrust from the critics contrasting vividly with the "Bravo, Kean," "Huzzah, Kean" of my adherents, but it was

only a voice crying out in the wilderness against me and my successes.

Although the most humiliating experiences that ever befell an actor were not spared me, my tours from New York to Philadelphia, from Philadelphia to Boston resembled a march of triumph, such as I could not conceive of beyond the stretches of my imagination. This same America, at a later date, mobilized a host of enemies against me; yet I still feel happy and content in the thought that it gave me some genuine friends as well who never failed me.

The people of Boston gave me a reception unequalled in turbulence and ecstasy. The public thronged to such an extraordinary extent that the number of my performances was insufficient to give the crowds clamouring admittance an opportunity of seeing me in my outstanding parts. It was therefore obvious that my stay in Boston had to be prolonged till other obligations in the southern States finally called me away. But I returned in May to Boston. I had by now a soft corner in my heart for this city and gladly offered myself for further guest-performances.

At this point I began to make bad mistakes causing grave mental and artistic harm to myself, as the future was to prove.

To my surprise Dickson, the actor-manager, advised me to discontinue my tour in these parts owing to the advanced season. I should have taken his counsel, for he had a thorough knowledge of the land and people. I, however, being firmly convinced of my great attraction in the New World, made light of his objections and forced him to announce my appearance.

On May 23rd I was billed in Boston as *King Lear*. What Dickson had feared and predicted actually happened: the theatre showed many empty seats; the following night the bookings were even more disappointing. On the third evening I was to play *Richard III*. Before going to my dressing-room to change I felt impelled to look through the hole in the curtain and saw to my unpleasant surprise that only about a score of people had been tempted to see me in my most important part. I—the great star and darling of the public—felt wounded to the core.

Instead of taking the customary way to my dressing-room I sent for Dickson. Coldly I declared that I would not play under these circumstances. Besides, I had made up my mind to leave Boston on the following morning. This town was so utterly lacking in respect and decency that it honoured a world-famous actor by staying away from the announced performances.

Dickson, startled at this, urgently advised me not to offend the

audience, few as they were, by proud overbearing behaviour. He begged me to play that evening at least. There would be nothing then in the way of my cancelling the contract.

It was at this juncture that the demoralizing effect of stardom became blatantly evident in my manner, of a stardom kept alive and supported by the moods and caprices of my public all over the world.

No argument of Dickson's was of any avail. In anger I shouted:

"A tragic hero playing to empty seats is no less pitiable than a rat in an empty cellar!"

With these words I left the theatre, striding out like the mighty Othello.

Soon after I had walked out trembling with rage, boxes and stalls had filled up, so that the cashier reported considerably higher takings than on the preceding nights.

It is only too well known, what sultry atmosphere hangs over a theatre-office, when the star performer in an injured voice flings his "I am not going to act" into the face of the producer, while the waiting audience is stamping and clapping impatiently. The desperate Dickson found himself in this unenviable position. It was above all essential to him to keep the Boston public in good humour because of his future livelihood. He did not know which way to turn. He hastened to my hotel. Wringing his hands he implored me to overlook the injury done to me for this evening at least and to reward the patience and indulgence of my numerous followers and admirers by my belated appearance.

I scarcely permitted Dickson to finish what he had to say; I felt I had to impress him with the superiority of my position. No, no, no! Nothing in the world could move me, the celebrated Kean, ever to return to a theatre whose audience had shown so little regard and affection for me. How could I, in my present mental state, be expected to play Richard III? No, no, no! An artist of the quality and standing of Edmund Kean is not to be dictated to by the ridiculous whims of a provincial public!

I left the contrite Dickson without in the least comprehending that just then I had been committing a grave error both personally and professionally.

Meanwhile the audience had become more and more restless at the belated rising of the curtain. "Begin! begin!" shouted voices in unison. And the booming of numerous human voices swelled to a tremendous roar.

Under these harassing circumstances Dickson had no other

choice but to let the producer step in front of the curtain with the announcement of my refusal to play.

"Why is Kean refusing?" shouted the indignant audience unanimously. The producer told them exactly and truthfully what had taken place.

The following day the hostility of the Boston public towards the haughty English guest was unmistakable. Also the press, without exception, sided with the public. Nothing spoke more distinctly of the sudden change of public opinion than the ironically bitter warrant published against me in the columns of a Boston newspaper:

"ONE CENT REWARD!

· "Run away from the Literary emporium of the New World, a stage player calling himself Kean. He may be easily recognized by his misshapen trunk and his cox-comical Cockney manners. His face is as white as his own froth, and his eyes are as dark as indigo. All persons are cautioned against harbouring the aforesaid vagrant, as the undersigned pays no more debts of his contracting after this date. As he has violated his pledged faith to me, I deem it my duty thus to put my neighbours on their guard against him.

PETER PUBLIC"

This was brutally plain speaking as one can expect only from a still young, robust and unscrupulous nation.

The effect of these violent attacks on the foreign invader—and by now I was one in the eyes of the American people—soon became evident. The New York papers sang the same tune; they raised clouds of dust making it impossible for me to appear before I had cleared up this unpleasant incident.

My explanation was published: circumstances had forced me to speak in plain terms; that nothing had been further from my mind than the intention to offend the Boston public. If I represented the facts in my own favour I was prompted merely by a desire to give the Boston people a chance to retract. Unfortunately I omitted to reckon with the American mentality. Hence I achieved just the opposite to what I had intended.

In my explanation I said:

"The managers apparently concurred with me, deplored the unfortunate state of the times, and we parted in perfect harmony and confidence. The present hostility I cannot believe is the voice of the public, but the spirit of detraction ever attendant on little minds—a spirit which watches for its prey, and seizes

on transient and accidental occurrences to defame and to destroy. That the press of America should be influenced by such feelings, that they should denounce with such acrimony, is to me extraordinary. It had been my intention to leave America at the close of my southern engagements, but I will certainly return to Boston and in person vindicate my cause during the season, when those who patronize the drama return to that city."

One can see from this that I was, as always in my life, a fencer preferring attack to defence. I frequently confused optimism with courage and courage with actual cleverness. I have come out of my battles covered with wounds, yet I never learnt a single lesson from my obvious defeats.

My explanation aroused the most violent opposition in the managers of the Boston theatre. Dickson, in an enraged reply, emphasized the fact that my unqualifiable conduct had caused him not only profound annoyance but also considerable pecuniary losses. It was not his, Dickson's, intention to offend his public; quite on the contrary, he had warned me not to break my contract, had urged me to fulfil my duties.

This outburst determined my further work in America.

Even my most intimate friends—among them above all the New York physician, Dr. John William Francis—counselled me to desist from a futile battle. Yes, the forces against me were mightier than I had ever dreamt; they certainly had the power to put obstructions in my way.

Resentful, hurt and nauseated by the end of my American adventure—for the conquest of the New World by Edmund Kean had become an adventure to me—I resolved to turn my back on a country which had changed its hospitality so rapidly into obvious hostility.

The New York papers printed a farewell message from me in which I said:

"As I find it impossible for individual efforts to stem the torrent of opposition with which I have to contend, and as I likewise consider it inconsistent with my feelings and character to make additional apologies, I have resolved to return to my native country, and beg leave to offer to the public my thanks for that portion of favour bestowed to me, and respectfully bid them farewell. Before I left England I was apprised how powerful an agent the press was in a free country, and I was admonished to be patient under the lashes that awaited me; and at a great sacrifice of feeling I have submitted to their

unparalleled severity and injustice. I was too proud to complain, and suffered in silence, but I have no hesitation in saying, that the conduct I pursued was that which every man would pursue under the same circumstances in the country where Shakespeare was born and Garrick acted. Again I disclaim any intention of offending; and although every natural and domestic tie, as well as the public love, await me on my own shores, it is with reluctance and regret I leave my friends in America."

I cannot suppress a painful smile looking at the old newspapers before me. The impetuous fighting-cock Edmund Kean stands before my mind's eye, his "God-given talent", his unshakable self-possession.

No doubt, my declaration in the New York papers was more of a retreat. It did not convince my old enemies, nor did it bring me any new friends. Over-strained, ailing, my vanity badly wounded, my ambition balked, I left the shores of the New World which I had reached with the assurance of a victor born, full of high hopes and expectations.

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CHAPTER XV

RETURN AND WELCOME

AFTER vicissitudes such as I encountered on my American journey, any other person would have approached the home port in a depressed frame of mind. But the more distinctly did the English coast grow visible, the more distinctly did I become conscious that England had waited patiently for my return, so deep was my belief in my artistic calling.

Therefore, after having landed in Liverpool, I wrote in impetuous high spirits to Elliston:

"My dear Elliston,

"With those feelings which an Englishman can alone understand I have touched again my native land. I shall be at the stage-door of Drury Lane at noon on Monday next. Do you think a few nights now would be of advantage to you? I am full of health and ambition, both of which are at your service, or they will run riot.

EDMUND KEAN"

Elliston would not have been a business man had he not grasped this opportunity with both hands. In addition he thought it advisable to welcome the return of the prodigal son with all the possible pomp at the disposal of the Napoleon of the stage. Besides, my arrival at Liverpool had coincided with the coronation of George IV, and all imaginable efforts were made by the theatre to stage something magnificent in competition with the pomp of the realm.

Thus it happened that after these festivities the astonished Londoners had the windfall of another celebration, in no way inferior to the splendour and magnificence of the coronation.

On reaching London, Elliston and his faithful ones met me with grand ceremonial; and, with a pomp and pageantry only customary on great State occasions, I was conducted to Drury Lane. Six horsemen in uniform led the procession; next came a Gala-coach drawn by four magnificent greys; in it sat Elliston acknowledging the cheers of the fascinated crowd. Followed a carriage drawn by four black horses in which I was seated, eagerly receiving the joyful salutes from my well-tested and loyal public. Drury Lane's leading players, solemn and dignified, were in the following coach drawn by four dappled ponies. A second troupe of riders in

picturesque theatrical costumes formed the end of the festive procession.

This triumphal procession, so like those of classical times, passed through streets thronged with sightseers of both sexes, gladly welcoming home their own Edmund Kean. True, it was an ovation which exposed the glamour of the theatre to uncharitable daylight. Posing like a Roman conqueror saluting graciously, smiling gratefully, I accepted the homage of thousands. A new part, an excellent part! I thought to myself, feeling greatly flattered. I placed my hand on my heart as a token of deep gratitude to the spectators lining my way. But suddenly I was startled by a quite different notion, making me uneasy and doubtful. I asked myself: The public that had seen me only in the warm footlights made up with paint and powder, what would they make of the pallor of my face, of the painful furrows thereon deepened in America by disappointment and wounded vanity? Was I really brimming over with health and vitality, as I had made Elliston believe in my exuberant joy at being home once more? Or was there something vitally wrong with me, was there something endangering the nerve-centre of my life?

I shivered as from cold, driving along amidst the loud cheers of my supporters; I endeavoured hard to dispel the gloomy and heretic thoughts which threatened to obscure the brilliance of my triumph.

I renewed my work as Richard III, and the Londoners could read in the newspaper concerning my reappearance:

"The house was oppressively crowded, and the interest excited fully equal to that of any former period. His entrée was greeted with a continuity of acclamation that for some time retarded the progress of the play. The pit simultaneously rose, and with waving of hats and repeated cheering, testified their undiminished sense of his great and commanding talent. The boxes, though less vehement, exhibited manifestations of similar import, while the galleries, uniting their voices, gave the whole an air of enthusiasm seldom witnessed. Mr. Kean, from indisposition, or some hidden cause, did not realize the perfection anticipated. His effort was comparatively cold and listless, and in a general sense undistinguished by those invigorating touches, that electrical effect, we have been accustomed to observe."

No doubt, I was in poor health; and this young enthusiast, John Keats, when writing in *The Champion* "On Edmund Kean as a Shakespearian Actor", exclaimed in pure rhapsody:

"Kean! Kean! have a carefulness of thy health, a nursing regard for thy own genius, a pity for us in these cold and enfeebling times! Cheer us a little in the failure of our days! for romance lives but in books. The goblin is driven from the hearth, and the rainbow is robbed of its mystery."

But although illness obliged me several times during the winter to interrupt my performances, it did not stay my growing attraction and popularity.

Only now had I truly reached the summit of my power over the people; my fame was in no way impaired by the fact that I caught myself acting not Othello, not Hamlet, but the celebrated Kean as Othello and Hamlet.

There comes a tragic moment in an artist's life, when spying on himself, he has to admit that he too has become a victim of his profession, a victim of the daily round and routine, of grinding monotony. He has to recognize that he has reached the point which, sooner or later, we all have to reach, the point where we begin to be only a sorry shadow of our former selves.

The actor himself is the very first person to sense his artistic stagnation, long before his public does—provided he is inexorably honest with himself. Besides, shallower people begin their worship of a recognized great one only when his sun is already starting to set.

What profound tragedy there is in the artist's painful awareness of his waning power—in as much as he himself is not an utterly vain and conceited creature!

I had a kind of presentiment that it would be my destiny to go to my ruin because of my failure to acknowledge my limitations. Alas, this heel of Achilles! To banish this threatening danger I felt the urgent need of intensifying all my actions and pleasures. And perhaps just in this very circumstance lies the tragedy of my life.

Was I a king, then let me be one in every respect—not only on the stage, but in real life as well! The costumes worn by me in the footlights represented the most costly and superb that the stage had ever seen. My ambition went further: my everyday costume should vie with the splendour of the richest and most magnificent monarch.

Proving Shakespeare's word "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players," I, the famous Edmund Kean, played my part with the virtuosity of a mature artist. From now on I held levees, I arranged for people to have audience with me; I surrounded myself with the nimbus of a godlike per-



KEAN AS HAMLET

Printed by T. Woolnoth, after Wageman



EDMUND KEAN

Engraving after a drawing by S. Cousins



Engraving by J. H. R.

After J. H. R.

KEAN AS IAGO

Printed by Mais, after Cruikshanks

WILLIAM HAZLITT

Drawn by Bewick

1 11 Hazlitt

sonage without equal. I raised the trivialities of everyday life to the standard of important ceremonials and never forgot to appear in the mask most flattering and favourable to my person.

If I was to be an actor, then let me be one in every sphere. Insatiable, tyrannical, unrivalled, I wanted to overshadow all, like a crowned despot. I acted! acted a continuous part in fierce daylight. I had no need of prompter. People had always credited me with "Charm", as an outstanding virtue of my nature. Now I felt impelled to emphasize this virtue and to meet my friends and followers with increased graciousness.

In summer 1822 I went on tour to Scotland. On the Isle of Bute I fell in love with Lord Bute's estate, situated romantically on the picturesque banks of Loch Fad. It conjured up an earthly paradise—without the serpent of ambition. Making a quick decision I communicated with the owner and acquired the property, eager to go and live with my wife and child in this fantastically beautiful spot.

Rumour has it that John Stuart, Earl of Bute, presented me with his country-seat in recognition of my services to the art of acting. To be true, I am quite unaware as to Lord Bute's ever having had any relation to the arts at all. In any case, he received a very ample rent from me for the land which I occupied. I rented about twenty acres in the island, and resolved to build a house upon the ground which I gave the name of "Wood Cottage".

Vanished from my mind the world of theatre with its envy and grudge, with the rivalry of colleagues, the presumption of the critics. Yet I acted! I acted the part of a well-to-do country gentleman for the benefit of myself and some few friends who were permitted to visit me in my self-chosen solitude. Amid pastoral surroundings, on the bosom of nature I could afford to smile at stage-gossip, at the moral indignation of the great world outside. In the costume of a fisher or yachtsman I paid homage to primitive pleasures; I studied the mentality and behaviour of the peasant; I philosophised while playing cards, while drinking with the village parson and farmer; and I wrote to Phillips, my secretary, in a proud and self-conscious mood:

"I shall not move from this heavenly spot—till the Christmas pantomime over—and a general stagnation in public excitement: and then—like a hawk I'll pounce upon my prey!"

If anyone, I was entitled to the rest and peace of this charming, idyllic retreat after unequalled triumphs and unsurpassed riches

and social position. The fairylike solitude of the Isle of Bute did wonders for my health as well as serving as a fitting background to my personality. Whether I planted a mulberry tree in memory of my taking possession of the island, whether I chose the spot for my future tomb, my furtive glances were ever seeking an imaginary audience that was unwilling to lose sight of their Edmund Kean, even in these parts.

News came to me that Garrick's widow had died, having reached the age of a hundred years—died just as she was ready to go to Drury Lane on the night of the reopening. I smiled sadly, yet with a peculiar lack of interest. What did all this mean to me? Drury Lane, Garrick, the opening of the winter season in face of the perpetual bliss far from all hustle and noise?

Shortly after this Elliston made me the offer to appear in company with Charles Young, the new star at Covent Garden. I became extremely anxious. I felt the passionate vibrations of a string which I had thought long since dumb. After some meditation, however, sudden anger seized me and I answered in an injured mood:

"My dear Elliston,

"You must forgive my being jealous of my hard-earned laurels. Young has many advantages that I have not—a commanding figure, sonorous voice, and, above all, lordly connections. I kick all such pests to the devil, for I hate a lord. I am therefore coming to meet an opposition made up of my own enemies (which, like locusts, almost darken the sun). The same breath that nourishes the flame this day, to-morrow puts it out. 'Aut Caesar aut nullus' is my text. If I become secondary in any point of view, I shrink into absolute insignificance."

And yet Elliston's remarkable power of persuasion—while appealing to an actor's ambition—made me reconsider his tempting offer. Certainly the tranquillity, the peace, the dreamlike beauty of my country-seat—so I thought—were things which could not be surpassed. A fool to leave them in pursuit of the bubbles of glory and fame. When I, however, recalled to mind the London public, when I realized how thousands of eager spectators would hang on my lips, whereas here in Bute the melancholic solitude of a Scottish autumn and winter awaited me, I was seized with the inveterate longing for the applause of the theatre, for the reconquest of the London public, so warm in their appreciation.

"To the devil with romance, solitude and tranquillity!" I exclaimed emphatically. I crumpled up another urgent letter of

Elliston's in which he described in eloquent terms the emotional appeal of the arts and the lust for sensations of the London season. "What is the dream-beauty of an enchanted bit of earth in comparison with the world of the theatre, the ringing up of the curtain, the breathless stillness of the audience and the magnificent force of Shakespeare's verse?"

Speaking thus, I resolved to bid farewell to the romance of my country-seat.

As early as 11th November 1822 I appeared as Richard III before my delighted London audience once more. From this appearance to my co-operation with Young was only a short step. Elliston, with his energy, overcame my opposition to this as well. On the announcement that I would appear as Othello and Young as Iago the London playgoers thronged to the box-office just as on the night of my performance with Junius Brutus Booth in the same part.

The situation seemed identical; the only difference being that I had become a few years older and that the enthusiasm of my followers, notwithstanding its outward show of exuberance, had naturally lost its freshness.

I was not a little perplexed, as I meditated thus: Was it that the people crowded into the theatre to witness the spectacle of an ageing champion being laid low by a young rival? Did they look on me as a gladiator who was only good enough to stimulate their blunted senses by his sudden extinction?

Resentfully I picked up the glove this rival had thrown into the arena. His clear young speaking voice resounded through the theatre like a trumpet of war. The first and second act went by without giving victory to either side. But, in the third act, when in Othello's love, I perish in fear, jealousy and despair, the audience sat with bated breath, their hearts beating to bursting point.

At that moment the battle was decided.

Young returned to Covent Garden, a disappointed man, as Junius Brutus Booth had done before him. The ageing Kean, with a tragic smile on his lips, realized he was still holding his position.

In spite of all these triumphs, honours and financial prosperity my physical and mental condition were in no way satisfactory. Nervy, irritable and ailing, dreading the possibility of failure, even feeling the approach of death, I gave way to a *menlacholia* which lacked the picturesqueness of stage melancholy. I endeavoured to

dispel this sadness with spirits, to drive out one devil with another.

Here I should like to insert two of those notorious anecdotes circulated everywhere about Edmund Kean. I do not do it because, according to the old rule, anecdotes are considered the tasty sauce for the not always tender roast served to the reader in form of a biography, but I think that anecdotes throw a person's mentality into strong relief and reveal it in its entirety through one single gesture or carelessly dropped word.

One of the favourite places of resort for me was a public-house called the "Coal Hole", situated in Fountain Court, off the Strand. It was the meeting-place of a club known as the Wolves, founded for the enjoyment of "good fellowship and harmony". The Wolves consisted of actors and those connected with theatres, together with such merry souls as loved a strong glass and a witty tale. No one was expected to enter this circle of good fellows without a pride that ranked him with the courtier, or philosophy that levelled him with the peasant.

Well, once in a night merrily passed in drinking I was offered a splendid yacht, a real bargain at £80, with an instalment of £30. The elated mood in which I found myself made my present existence seem monotonous and insipid. The real epicurean and practical philosopher—so it flashed through my mind—would prefer the water to terra firma. He would trust his luck to the waves, and, be he an actor, he would sail down the Thames to the theatre night after night, to bestride the planks of his yacht after each performance with a heightened feeling of exaltation.

Without any further consideration I sealed the pact with a cordial handshake, thus clenching the bargain. And when soon after I returned home in a gaily irresponsible mood, I hastened to inform poor drowsy Mary that I was the proud possessor and captain of a seaworthy yacht, and to hum to her Thomas Moore's

*Come o'er the sea,
Maiden, with me!*

On the following morning, alas, the cold, prosaic workaday world rudely claimed its right. My valet, trying to rouse me from a heavy stupor, informed me that a strapping fellow demanded to see me on urgent business.

"Your yacht, sir!"

Drowsily blinking I shot up in bed.

"To hell with the yacht! Is Clarges Street in Venice? Away with you, monstrosity of a wild imagination!"

It soon leaked out that the visitor was in no mind to burst like a soap-bubble. With resolute insistence it came from his lips instead:

"A bargain is a bargain. You bought the yacht, Mr. Kean, and I am here to get the first instalment."

My brain was in a whirl. I seemed to recollect faintly something of a gay, wild night. Sure, there had been a man who had succeeded in palming a yacht off on me, a real bargain! But that had been the climax of a merry orgy. What use was a yacht to me on a grey early morning?

"It's a pretty piece of timber, and keeps the water out," affirmed the man proudly.

I shivered at the mere thought of water.

"My dear man, you'll understand, surely——" I implored the owner of the yacht.

But my visitor, with small, malicious eyes and stiff neck, remained adamant, till in the end I was glad of getting out of the "real bargain" by paying him the sum of £30, the agreed first instalment on his yacht.

The second anecdote, though less amusing, throws, however, a very significant light on my frame of mind at that time.

One night arriving home, still in the make-up and costume of Richard III, with feverish pulse, exhausted and yet strung up, with all my nerves aquiver, I hotly demand brandy, my universal remedy. Mary, realizing my condition, tries to divert me from my intention.

"Imagine, Edmund," she calls out excitedly and not without a mother's pride, "our son Charles has talent for acting. He has recited for me to-day. Shall he do it for you as well?"

Without waiting for my answer she hurries to the bedroom, pulls the drowsy boy from his bed, brings the timidly resisting lad to me and asks him to repeat his recitation for his father. The boy, beginning timorously, by and by warms to his task. I listen to him silently, leaning forward a little, still in my wild mask, my face framed by Richard's loose hair. When the boy has finished I straighten myself and say in a cold and curt manner:

"Go along! Good night! It is time to go to bed. But no more acting, Charles!"

And turning to Mary I continue in sudden anger:

"The boy might succeed as actor if he tries; but if he should, I'll cut his throat. I am the first and shall be the last tragedian of my name. The name shall die with me, and be buried in my coffin."

With these words I leave the room, whistle for my setter, order my manservant to take with him a case of pistols, two candles

and a bottle of brandy, and to fetch a cab. The carriage comes. The sleepy driver asks rather ill-temperedly: "Where to?" "To hell!" I give answer and urge him to hurry.

Not far from Waterloo Place I call a halt and order my servant, who is seated next to the driver, to wait with the carriage for my return. Whereupon I disappear in the dark, ready to fight hell and the devil himself.

In one of the narrow lanes I have to pass, in front of a low tavern, I come upon a gang of cattle-drovers, sodden with drink, quarrelling noisily with a rat-catcher. I, in the mask of Richard, want to play the royal judge. The drunkards, in the flickering light of torches, stare at my painted face, finger the stray mummer's cloak and jacket and marvel at the old-fashioned sword hanging from my belt.

"Well, how now? Are you going to submit to my judgment?" I shout with grand gesture, drawing the sword; and to emphasize my words, bring it flat down on the rickety deal table.

Exasperated, one of the drovers grabs me by the jacket and stammers:

"Who are you, you fool of a mummer to interfere with the squabbles of honest people?"

"Who am I? you scoundrel," I shout back at him, throwing the pint mug which stands before him right into his face. "This with the compliments of Edmund Kean whom everybody knows or ought to know!"

Infernal noise and screams! The drovers become even more riotous. The rat-catcher jumps from the herring-barrel where he had taken refuge and sides with his adversaries. The night-revellers go for me in closed column. They are wild fellows reeking of brandy. At this moment my skill in boxing comes to my rescue. Here a hard right swing, there a short punch to the stomach! The fellows drop to the floor heavily like sacks of flour.

In the end, however, I succumb to the odds against me. Battered and bruised, with slashed jacket and empty sheath, a queer Richard staggers through the maze of lanes till at last he finds the waiting valet and the cursing driver in Waterloo Place. They drag the man-handled Richard into safety. But the slumber of the ill-used Kean at home was disturbed by wild dreams:

I was trying to find my way through hell entangled in the tails of demons, haunted by their grimaces, a victim of a nightmare.

Mary watched anxiously at my bedside, keeping away all visitors, lest news of this new adventure should find its way through London.

CHAPTER XVI

A SHADOW ACROSS THE PATH

I FEEL the time has come to confess one of the worst failings of my life.

Looking at it in retrospect, I am aware that my whole life, like a Greek drama, was a sequence of crime and punishment, as if driven on by a hidden force. My errors, small as they were at the beginning, grew and became an avalanche. At once the furies, revengeful as ever, crowded in and retribution followed.

I have to begin with Mary's fate; a fate truly lamentable. No doubt, years of wandering, of misery, starvation and begging had created ties between us that should have been sufficient in themselves to stand the test of a lifetime. Yet, in spite of it our marriage had been destined to be a failure from the onset. A youth of twenty is bound to find the motherly and self-sacrificing love of a woman nearly ten years his senior rather colourless and wanting in stimulus. As he drifts through life he instinctively seizes the hand offered to him, hoping that it will put him on solid ground.

A woman of Mary's insipid type could never have held a man of uncontrollable passions like me.

If I already looked for diversion in the wild life of ale-houses during the years of our wandering, I confess, I must assess blame not only to the misery of a vagrant life without hope of betterment, but also in the main to the woman at my side whose constant, gentle lamentations drove a man of my temperament to despair.

London and my meteor-like rise to fame gave fresh colour to this picture; for Mary as the wife of a celebrated actor was happy in the fulfilment of the duties now devolving on her.

I myself derived nothing from it. If anything, I even suffered more; being in the very midst of society, I met women of every rank, of every degree of beauty. I was spoilt and wooed by them. No wonder that I was not always deaf to the enticing music of sirens.

But these were only passing escapades, incident on my exposed position. Even Mary did not take them too seriously and made the best of them, if only a poor best.

An entirely different factor led to the ultimate breach between

us: my acquaintance with Charlotte Cox, the wife of the London banker and alderman, Robert Albion Cox. This attachment became the drama of my life; it filled my days with shadows and was the real cause of my fall from dizzy heights.

I do not think I could be accused of disloyalty, if I disclose the name of a beloved woman to posterity. Our contemporaries sat in judgment on us publicly. Only the desire for sincerity compels me once more to expose to the light of day a lawsuit then capable of rousing the emotions of the whole world.

Frances Charlotte Cox was in Taunton when in the year 1816 I took the part of Othello on tour. This beautiful, exquisitely dressed woman, seated in a stage box, compelled my attention; indeed, it seemed as if I was playing that night entirely and only for her. It happened that during the scene of Othello's jealousy in Act 4 Charlotte Cox was overcome by his raving and fell in a dead faint.

The play had to be interrupted. Although I was quite aware of having caused this exciting incident I could not help feeling satisfaction at the emotional effect of my acting. I therefore ordered that this beautiful woman should be carried to my dressing-room and there laid on the couch. When after many efforts Charlotte opened her eyes, they fell on Othello kneeling anxiously before her. Full of contrition he at once offered his apologies for the brutality of his acting. Provoked by this gallant gesture Mrs. Cox expressed her great regret at the unpleasant disturbance and followed it up by singing the praises of my artistry.

Fortunately the situation had now changed. No more did I kneel uneasy before a pale fainting beauty, but was seated next to a charming woman sparkling and brimming over with vitality. She, in her turn, gladly yielded to the dangerous Othello, to his impassioned glances, to the smile of his full lips.

The call-boy at the door of the dressing-room asked humbly to be allowed to give the signal for recommencing. But in this dressing-room there was seated a couple who seemed to have long forgotten public and theatre and obviously enjoyed gazing into each other's eyes, detecting there signs of love at first sight.

As the audience were showing signs of impatience, the manager and producer urged me to finish my part. We had to bid farewell to each other in great haste. Mrs. Cox left the dressing-room not without having warmly invited me to visit her in her home in London on my return there. This invitation paved the way to cordial relations between the families Kean and Cox which deepened, as time went on, into close friendship. Mr. Cox soon

showed great interest in Drury Lane; he became one of its shareholders.

There was no reason why Mary should have objected to her husband's friendship with the "highly respected" banker. Frequent invitations were exchanged. We saw each other at home or in the country. Mr. and Mrs. Cox were well-known visitors at my dressing-room; nobody saw anything out of the ordinary in the fact that often after the performance Charlotte made me go home with her, where we finished the evening celebrations whether her husband was present or not.

Mary looked quietly on; she was seemingly interested in and pleased with the growth of our friendship. And yet she inevitably, with the wide-awake instinct of an ageing woman, soon sensed a more tender and passionate bond between Charlotte and me than even any disregard for middle-class sentiment would have permitted.

I think Mary must have suffered in silence a long time. Then came a day when this despairing woman summoned her last strength to save our marriage from ruin. Without doubt, each glance between Charlotte and me, each tender word spoken inadvertently to each other, became like a poisoned arrow in Mary's heart, whipping her blood to fever-heat. She smiled—yes, smiled, with the strength of a desperate woman, till she saw no other possibility of stemming our passions than to throw the cards on the table.

In the banker's salon, where comfortable armchairs and priceless etchings diffused an atmosphere of ease and elegance, both couples, Charlotte and Mr. Cox, Mary and myself stood facing each other. A shriek broke from Charlotte, wounded and harassed by Mary's revelations. I seized Mary's hand and acted a dramatic scene worth witnessing by an enthusiastic audience. In the centre of an imaginary stage stood Alderman Cox, a stately and corpulent gentleman, humbled, bewildered, with the smile of bereavement on his lips. He passed the back of his hand across his forehead as if to eradicate the knowledge of a painful incident by this symbolic gesture.

But the word once uttered locked the door on the discovered secret of an inadmissible love and made retreat impossible.

Charlotte had buried her face in the sofa cushions and sobbed unrestrainedly. Mary stood there, tacit and inexorable, acting the part of a vestal virgin, consciously guarding the flame of virtue. Alderman Cox made a few tentative steps towards Charlotte, hesitated however and stiffened as if in a dream. I stopped in

front of an etching, representing "Lovers caught". I could not understand how anyone could make a scene of tragedy in this room whilst they looked twenty or thirty times a day with amusement on the colourful representation of a similar incident without feeling the slightest scruples.

This incident, from such dramatic beginnings, closed in a quiet and indecisive manner. Cox was the first to regain his composure. He could not do anything else in this awkward situation but take refuge in an outer and inner equanimity, were he not to trample on all that mattered in his life. In brief, he demanded that in absence of any proofs, the connection should cease, in case of ensuing scandal. He owed it to himself as alderman and banker before the public and before his conscience. His wife's reputation, which would always remain unimpeachable, to him would then be re-established and put in a favourable light.

With courtesy and dignity he bowed his guests to the door; he himself hurried to his office considering the whole affair as finished for good.

In reality, however, nothing had been achieved by this interview. The near future was to prove that the violent passion which had driven Charlotte into my arms only gained in momentum. She refused to renounce a happiness to which she was drawn by every impulse and desire.

I must reveal that in this turbulent love-affair it was ultimately Charlotte who played the more active part. If at times I yielded to moral scruples and hesitated to continue a love built on feet of clay, then it was always Charlotte's passionate ardour which lulled to sleep my awakened sense of duty and responsibility. This woman's burning passion ruthlessly swept aside any obstacle which was likely to prevent the fulfilment of her desires.

It is in no way my intention to clear myself altogether from guilt.

A man ruled by his sex instinct is only too readily possessed by any woman appealing to this instinct. He becomes like one intoxicated or ridden by a fever of the worst kind. Logical objections are not for him. As if he were battering his head on a stone wall he rushes to his doom.

Our relationship must be judged from this point of view. Perhaps Charlotte was not at all beautiful; perhaps she had a common mentality and had no right to compare herself with Mary, so sensitive, so reserved. Perhaps the whole affair was only a phantom crossing my path to hurl me from the height of my triumphs. Perhaps—but what is the use of brooding over the secret causes

of the terrible catastrophe which was to overtake me? The fact remains that on one side was a man, an irresolute fool, driven by his sex impulses, on the other a woman, passionate and turbulent, recognizing no limits where her supposed happiness was at stake.

From now on, in order to frustrate Charlotte's advances, I thought it expedient to give strict orders to the wardrobe man to refuse entrance once for all to this temperamental woman. The result was that Mrs. Cox forced her husband to call for me at the end of my performance and escort me, with assurances of eternal appreciation, to his home in Wellington Street. There we gave proof of having bridged an almost impassable gulf by turning night into day. One thing is certain: Robert Albion Cox suffered as much at the hands of his wife as I did. He too was her slave. He too saw the only way in submitting to her will, even if it ran contrary to his wishes. This shameful relationship between Charlotte Cox and me lasted for years. I was in a constant state of either exultation or despair. I did not know, and to this day I do not know, how to judge the innermost nature of this woman. Voices were raised—and in time they grew unmistakably audible—accusing Charlotte of being a heartless cocotte, who played fast and loose with the valuable treasures fallen into her lap. They said that she got out of Edmund Kean whatever she desired; yes—it was at the time when Mr. Cox, owing to unlucky speculations, found himself in very bad straits—she even did not hesitate to make her lover the saviour of her financial distress.

I listened to these voices only under pressure. For years I had been warned that I had been enmeshed unawares by an evil woman who would not shrink from bestowing similar favours on others. I staggered through life as through an enchanted forest, bewildered and bewitched by a Circe who brought to me the smiles of a child and the voluptuousness of a prostitute. I suffered agonies from the jealousy of my wife, when she caught me writing tender notes to another woman. In her despair she was loath to lose sight of me, whenever I left the house.

"Fly swift, ye hours, until we meet once more!" I wrote to the adored woman during my stay in distant America. But after my return, having come to earth again: "I am watched more closely than Bonaparte at St. Helena."

When a few years later the Kean-idolatry was noticeably on the decline, my tours in the provinces had not the appeal of former occasions, this "phenomenon", as I called it, had such a devastating effect on me that, the first time in my life, I looked for consolation and support. I was so far from Charlotte, from Mary on

whose sympathy I could depend, that I now felt an unaccustomed loneliness and weakness. The cry for help from the disappointed lover came to Charlotte Cox from Bath, where I had played without much success:

"I am in such a vortex of perplexities and mortifications that I can scarce collect my thoughts sufficiently to thank you for your letter, and to tell you how much I love you. It is now, my dearest girl, I wish for you, now that I am suffering under the most painful sensations of wounded pride, my mind boiling with rage and grief; want now my own dear darling, my love, to condone with; my fevered head wants rest in the bosom of my Charlotte. Indignation, resentment, and all the passions of the furies guide my hand, while I tell you that in this infernal city, where I was a few years since the idol of the people, my endeavours are totally failing. I have not yet acted one night to the expenses; come to me, my darling, come to me, or I shall go mad. If my provincial career is followed up by this terrible sample, heaven or hell must be opened for me. I bore my elevation with philosophy; I feel I cannot long submit to the opposite. Meet me as soon as possible at Birmingham, that is, as soon as safety will permit, and believe me, I love you to distraction, and in heart I am solely yours for ever, ever, ever."

Charlotte Cox wished for nothing better than to follow this call for help of her tormented lover and to start for Birmingham without delay. I had counselled precaution; she thought herself secure from detection by telling her husband that she was going to Brighton on a visit to her mother.

Robert Albion Cox was by now no longer the well-to-do banker and highly esteemed alderman of old, but a man worried and broken by business failures; restless, nervy and easily frightened. He had no objections to the sudden departure of his wife. But when good friends volunteered the news that his wife had been seen in Birmingham and not in Brighton, the same Birmingham where at the time a certain Edmund Kean was on tour, Robert Albion Cox probably passed the back of his hand once again over his forehead, as though to blot out for ever from his memory an unpleasant and embarrassing incident.

This time he evidently did not gain the equanimity by which, on a former occasion, he had vindicated himself. Whispers were abroad that he was a cuckold and that a famous actor was the cause of it. To aggravate matters, one day, in Charlotte's absence, he came upon a bundle of my letters to Charlotte in a wardrobe of his bedroom. Unhappy and harassed, Mr. Cox saw no other

way out of this chaos than to take proceedings against me, not for a divorce, but for payment of £2,000 as damages for alienation of his wife's affections.

The whole English-speaking world was agog. With feverish anticipation they awaited the court-proceedings which were to unmask their idol, their Macbeth, Othello, Hamlet, and show him up as a poor weak human creature.

CHAPTER XVII

DIVORCE PROCEEDINGS

THE corridors of the Court of King's Bench, Guildhall, echoed with the steps of the curious crowd. The portraits of the dignified kings of the house of Hanover looked down on them from the walls. Beneath their wigs the faces of the judges seemed to assume a rigid gravity, even a certain unfriendliness. With an uneasy feeling and a sense of discomfort I was now to play the unchosen part of the accused in the *cause célèbre* of *Cox v. Kean*. Counsel Scarlet was to defend me.

Scarlet did not wait till counsel of the plaintiff brought his batteries into action; he attacked in flank by making the sensational assertion that Charlotte not only deceived her own husband but Edmund Kean as well. Even more, that alderman and banker Cox had been accessory to the fact and had driven Charlotte into my arms for reasons of gain.

I lifted my hand in an effort to stop him, but Scarlet had already thrown his accusations into the face of the plaintiff. The public sat motionless. Then, however, whispers and hushed words broke the stillness, a cool, short gust of wind heralding a thunderstorm.

The judges, grave and inaccessible, raised their eyebrows and shook their heads, causing white powder to fly from their wigs.

Scarlet's tactics were amazing in their brutality. And yet only evidence counted in this court. But the evidence consisted of the letters in the possession of Mr. Cox—my letters to Charlotte Cox. They had to be read—letter after letter, to form an opinion about the shameless conduct of an immoral actor and a profligate woman.

Unfriendly whispers again hissed through the hall—lust for sensation, malignant joy sparkled in the eyes of those not involved—those ladies of the fashionable world, decked in their jewels, giggling and whispering behind their restless fans, those well-groomed gentlemen with their superior airs and their blasé ways.

On the hard lips of the judges played the ghost of an expectant smile. The public of a country, the public of a world pricked up its ears and listened. Strong is the desire to see the curtain of

romance torn to shreds and to follow a celebrated actor along the paths of dark passion.

Behind the horn spectacles of the reading judge gleamed the cold smile of extreme impartiality:

"Dearest of women,

". . . I am satisfied we were formed for each other; the assimilation of disposition, in all its characters, proclaims it; and I could, if I was not a philosopher, revile most impiously the fate that has given you to another.

"From the first moment I saw you, I loved every hour; that passion has increased; and, in the possession of your heart, I acknowledge, with gratitude, that I have obtained the very summit of my wishes. Do not doubt me, Charlotte; I write you from my heart, a heart overflowing with love, from a heart that while it beats shall own no other mistress. Dear, dear, dear girl, more than fame, more than wealth, more than life, more than heaven—I love you."

The judge turned the pages.

A letter from Philadelphia:

"My dearest little love,

"I have received your enchanting little epistle, though I am almost angry with you, to suppose that for a moment I could cease to love you. Do believe me, when I tell you that every hour of absence I feel more and more the influence you have over my heart; one moment I think of my folly in not encouraging your proposal of coming with me, and the next, applaud my fortitude in repelling the foremost of my wishes; but we shall meet again, sweet. I hear of all the adventures of the Drury Lane Theatre: in your next tell me their successes, whether the humble spark of talent of the Kean still glows in the dramatic world; or if some unexpected meteor has dazzled the perception to the total extinction of the minor light. I am almost tempted to say, 'Come over and tell me all yourself'; but then, you could never return, and I must; besides you would by such an act lose your rank in society, which you are so well qualified to adorn. I fancy I have you near me, and cannot help, boy-like, kissing the paper that I know will shortly be in your hands.

"Oh, dear, dear, dear girl, if I had but you in my arms, amidst the acclamations that attend my professional career, I should think this the promised Elysium.

"Dear, dear, dear little girl—

*Doubt that the stars are fire,
Doubt that the sun doth move,
Doubt truth to be a liar,
But never doubt I love."*

The laughter of a highly amused audience descended 'on me like hailstones.

There! Look at the idol of a world!—unmasked, placed in the pillory, the target of everybody's mockery. Yesterday still a master of the stage, to-day a poor sinner, wan and pitiable, sneered at and pilloried.

Under the cold, impartial glance of the judge the flood of laughter ebbed away. He handled the letters before him like unpaid bills; these letters that laid bare the secrets of a loving heart. In an even voice he read on:

"... I have now, Charlotte, dispassionately and reflectively placed my whole heart and soul upon you! It may perhaps be burdensome to you, for I am jealous, very jealous. I know as yet I have no cause, but absence is sometimes dangerous. I have given up all frivolities of my nature, rejected all correspondence that could interfere with your feelings. I have thought of you with the affection of a lover, and with the admiration of a friend: I have weighed the incontestable proofs of your love, have dwelt with rapture on the retrospection of the most happy moments of my life spent in your society, and on summing up, have come to this conclusion, that through life, when imperious duty does not interfere, I am, my dear Charlotte, unalterably, determinately, and affectionately

Yours,

"EDMUND"

Once more a wave of whispers rolled through the court. From the gallery came noises as during an interval in a theatre. New-comers thronged the gangways and were making for the few empty seats.

But the Lord Chief Justice Abbott indignantly turned on these disturbers of the peace:

"This Court has been built with a very liberal view to the accommodation of the public. I am anxious they should enjoy that accommodation; but while they do so, they must not interrupt the administration of justice. If the noise is repeated, I will order the whole gallery to be cleared. I should regret to do so; but at all events the administration of justice must not be impeded."

Silence ensued. And the reading of the letters was resumed.



W.X.
MR KEANA ~~THE~~ LEAR.

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STARRING IT—A MOST DECIDED HIT!

THE PROOFS OF THE PUBLIC HATRED
Contemporary Caricature on Kean

A new tone was noticeable in my lines after my return from America:

"My darling love,

"We must be more cautious—we must consider how many interests are involved in our destruction (for destruction is the word for discovery)—wives, husbands, children, fortune."

Or the letter of the lover, timidly looking about him, aroused renewed laughter of mockery:

"If the goods are not found upon the thief, there can be no conviction! Make up your mind by Monday, and meet me alone, if possible, close to the Diorama, Regent's Park, by one o'clock. Keep the meeting an entire secret, if you can; if that is impracticable, do not let any other person be prepared to see me, till the moment I stand before them. There is but one point on which I am firm; that is, my duty to my family; after that, I am all in all yours for ever."

Was there need of any more proofs of my guilt?

The judge was still reading out letter after letter. I bowed my head low, pale and ashamed. There was always the same melody singing and rejoicing in my letters:

"My Heart-Strings,

"That you are mistress of my heart and fate, every moment of my life confirms. The world without you appears one vast and gloomy dungeon, and your letters are as sunbeams through the grating of the prison-house. O God! Charlotte, how I love you. If such a feeling is a crime, why are we given it? I did not seek it. The power that will condemn has placed you in my way. I must not doubt the justice of the Great Being, and have little or no faith in the general Tempter. Whate'er it be, 'you are my fate—my heaven or my hell.'"

Letter after letter, an accusing bundle of pathetic declamations, as only a true lover can utter, intermingled with tendernesses and intimacies, which were now displayed like dirty linen before a sensation-hungry public.

The contents of these confessions destined for only one single person were reflected in the judge's features. They were rigid and distant, morally indignant, sarcastic and sneering; they became enlivened with the extremely superior laughter of a guardian of morality when I, in playful tenderness, addressed the adored by the term of endearment "Little Breeches!" or exclaimed: "I will hold my little darling to my heart, and sleep in spite of thunder!"

Roars of laughter from the public. Triumph of people whose morals were above reproach, of hypocrites who walked warily through life. They had caught their Othello, Hamlet, Richard III off his guard in his underclothes, and thus ridiculed he would go down to posterity.

The newspapers seized on the scandal with avidity. Almost foaming at the mouth reporters prided themselves on being heralds of virtue and puritanism. Like a heap of autumn leaves in a whirlwind the most intimate letters of a lover caught red-handed fluttered through the world. The verdict of the court—£800 damages to the injured husband—did not cause nearly as much sensation as the exposed love-life of the idol of the public. Pamphlets, lampoons, ballads about Charlotte and myself whirled through the town. The ballad-singers were having a great time. It proved vastly amusing to all classes when two of these singers having chosen the same pitch came to blows over their ballad of "Kean and his Dulcinea" and fought a veritable battle with their wooden legs.

Even a defamatory play came out and found great favour. Its sensational title was *The Actor and the Alderman's Wife; or Kean and his Little Breeches*. A farce in three acts. Written by Thomas Little, Esq. Dedicated to Edmund Kean, Esq., of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, and Court of King's Bench, Guildhall.

It was a horrible nightmare of my waking hours. Nobody will praise me for the fact that I wisely refrained from submitting to the court Charlotte's compromising letters to me. Shunned by my friends, forsaken by wife and child, I was condemned helplessly to watch the public, now a howling mob, indulging in coarse fun and jokes at my expense.

Still my former vitality had not yet run dry. The adventurer, the fighter, the fencer roused himself from his paralysing lethargy and determined to enter the lion's den at the risk of his life, and to face fearlessly the brutes who once had applauded and cheered him.

Less than a week elapsed between the court proceedings that had branded me in the eyes of the world and the time of my re-appearance on the stage. Was I, in my foolhardiness, not satisfied with the verdict of the court? Or did an inner voice urge me to appeal to my public as to a higher Court and to compel them to deliver another verdict irrevocable and final?

Why did I not heed those prophetic lines which were published by the *Champion* during my first season at Drury Lane:

*Mr. Kean! Mr. Kean! tho' the summit you've trod
Of greatness theatric at Drury,
The very same mob that now hail you a god
Will stone you to death in their fury!*

Great excitement took hold of the London people when my intentions were made known to them. Already in the afternoon of the day of my reappearance Drury Lane was besieged by crowds of people. At six o'clock all street entrances were obstructed by carriages and pedestrians. Many persons fainted. When the box-office opened a never-ending stream of people thronged the passages and staircases of the theatre. Although the house was sold out new crowds of people pressing on, occupied the gangways and were hanging dangerously over the balustrade of the upper circle.

The overture was drowned by an ominous noise. And yet, when the curtain rose, revealing me to the audience as Richard III, I seemed to detect a wave of warmth in the calls of "Kean, Kean" that came from my unswerving followers. At the same time, however, whistles and hisses shrilled through the house and swept over the heads of the public like howling rockets. "Kean, Kean!" my partisans shouted loudly and more challengingly. The adversaries answered with laughter, sneers and mockery.

I felt my heart beat violently. But I knew that a single gesture of surrender from me would spell ruin. At that moment nobody could tell whether my friends or my foes were the stronger party. When I, with unshakable sincerity, stepped in front of the footlights and lifted my hand in order to address the audience, an avalanche of hatred met me; it took my breath away and I found it impossible to speak even a single word to my accusers.

Shrugging my shoulders I stepped back and began my monologue:

Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this sun of York——"

But the uproar of two parties trying to down each other by whistling, shouting and clapping drowned my words completely. A ghostlike play was acted on the stage. Actors moved about, declaimed and shouted themselves hoarse; yet the words they uttered simply sank into this babel. Stalls and boxes battled with each other in shrill ecstasy, whilst the gallery assumed the role of the judge and merrily and in unison sang the hunters' chorus from Weber's opera *Der Freischütz*.

Once more I made an effort to speak. But stepping on the stage behind the footlights I was greeted with renewed howling by my adversaries. "Get out!" "Get off the stage!" they cried.—"Long live Kean!" responded my friends. Rigid and upright I stood without a trace of fear or embarrassment. My outward calm in acute contrast to the chaos within only fanned the flames of passion in my opponents. A fanatic shouted: "Go wash your face, Kean, but you can never wash your heart clean!" Another even more loudly: "Your face is black, but your heart is blacker!" In despair my followers fought: "No cant! no hypocrisy! Kean for ever and ever!" But their efforts were swallowed up in the wild tumult. Abusive words were hurled at me. But seeing that also these seemed of no avail, a hail of oranges, buttons and other diverse missiles followed. Richard III submitted to it all as boldly as brass; finally he drew his sword to sweep away the unmistakable proofs of the public hatred with contempt. Amid the furious shouts of an audience let loose the curtain fell and separated me from my antagonists.

Despite this interruption the battle raged on unceasingly in the stalls and upper circle of Drury Lane. A placard with the improvised letters "Long live Kean!" suddenly appeared above the public in the stalls; renewed shouts of protest, renewed shrill sounds of whistling. A playgoer in one of the boxes raised himself on to the balustrade and called out with stentorian voice above the general uproar: "The theatre is no tribunal; it is not the public's business to sit in judgment on the private affairs of an actor!" This appeal to the common sense of the audience shared the same fate as all the others heretofore; it was drowned in the furious howling of the enemy.

By this time, having shouted itself hoarse, the public insisted on seeing Elliston. He, as the manager of Drury Lane, was to answer for my reappearance.

Elliston came and explained: "My contract with Kean was effected long before the court proceedings. A man of honour is bound to keep his arrangements."

Over him too rolled the wave of violent opposition; but with the look of a lion-tamer in his eyes he cried: "Ladies and gentlemen! Every accused has a right to defend himself! Why do you not permit Edmund Kean to say a few words of explanation and justification?"

My friends and followers cheered the manager. Making the most of this not unfavourable situation he quickly disappeared behind the scenes and within a few moments reappeared on the

stage holding my hand. I had already donned my ordinary outdoor clothes and, surrounded by my desperate colleagues, was only awaiting the result of Elliston's dispute with the public.

The uproar of the enemy actually ebbed away for a few moments thus giving me a chance to speak. I did it with a firm voice, audible in every part of the theatre:

"If it is supposed by those whom I address, that I stand before you for the purpose of explaining or justifying my private conduct, I must beg leave to state that they will be disappointed, for I am quite unable to do so. I stand before you, ladies and gentlemen, as the representative of Shakespeare's heroes, and by the public voice I must stand or fall. My private conduct has been investigated before a legal tribunal, where decency forbade my publishing letters and giving evidence that would have inculpated others, though such a course would, in a great degree, have exculpated me. (Applause and hissing.) If, ladies and gentlemen, I have withheld circumstances from motives of delicacy, it was from regard to the feeling of others, not of myself. (Clamours of applause mingled with hisses.) It appears at this moment that I am a professional victim. (Laughter.) I will not submit to be trampled upon by a hostile press; but if the public is of opinion that my conduct merits exclusion from the stage, I will at once bow to its decision, and shall retire with deep regret, and with a grateful sense of all the favours which your patronage has hitherto conferred on me."

"No! No! stay here! Long live Kean! Forgive and forget!"

The joyous consent of the public, so easily swayed by orating, rewarded me for my well-planned tactics. My opponents who had come to destroy me were, without knowing it, now on their defensive; and if there were still those who wished to make trouble, they were soon dealt with by being thrown out of the theatre.

At last Shakespeare came into his own. His play could now proceed without opposition, without interruption.

My next appearance caused excited scenes as well, though they assumed not quite the same disturbing character as on the first evening. Again I had to appear before the footlights, had to speak to the audience in order to parry their attacks. I said:

"I have made as fair concession to a British audience as a British actor ought. I hope, for the honour of my country, that I shall be permitted to perform for the remainder of twenty nights, after which I shall take my leave for ever. I hope also, for the honour of my country, that news of this persecution will never reach foreign annals."

This new address did not fail to have its desired effect. It was a fight to win over the public, a fight waged with all my might for several hours, followed with tense interest by the audience, so full of the sporting spirit. If I came out victor from this wrestling match it was at the cost of mental forces which I was never to regain. With a bitter smile I meditated on this victory. A heap of ruins lay before me—a wrecked marriage, the loss of my home—but what affected me most deeply was the knowledge that the woman I had fought for had deceived me despite all her oaths and assurances of love, just as she had deceived her own husband. Lonely, broken in body and mind, I thought life hardly worth living. On the night of my farewell-performance in London, when the acclamations of the audience were roaring round me as in my happier days, I stood in the footlights deeply moved, hardly able to utter a word of thanks: finally I forced myself to speak these words of farewell to my friends in the stalls:

“I have been able to overcome one of the most powerful and most malignant attacks to which a professional man has ever been subjected. Without alluding to past circumstances, I consider it a base plan for my destruction; and under the influence of your displeasure, which my powerful enemies endeavoured to augment, I must have sunk, had not the public protected me. My gratitude is indelible, and my endeavours to merit your favours shall be unceasing.”

I see my readers smile. Certainly, I am not going to dispute the contradiction between these hopeful words and the promise to leave the stage for ever. The man who understands the actor, his yearning for applause and success, will not blame me clinging to this applause as the mainstay of my life, hoping for a future which would spread the kindly veil of oblivion over the past.

Sweet, indeed, is the acknowledgement and enthusiasm of a deeply affected public; exquisite the laurels adorning the brow of the artist! How can one compare the furious howling of the opponents with the raptures of success? It dies away like a passing thunderstorm in the distance.

I felt like a martyr to my own passion. I shuddered at the thought of my future life, a life without a part to play, without the glamour of the footlights; I shuddered at the void, at the suffocating aridity. Yes! I frankly admit: Yearning for the fanfare of victory was stronger in me than discretion, than the sense of shame. A born actor cannot live without the rustling of the rising and falling curtain, without the crowds who in semi-darkness of the auditorium eagerly await the magic spell of his art.

Better to be indiscreet, to be shameless, than a grey, insignificant nobody who only vegetates but does not live.

Thus I yielded to the Circe-like allurements of the stage; alas, I was not strong enough to withstand the bewitchment of this enchantress.

I went on tour in the provinces. The performances assumed the character of a farewell, offering me a welcome pretext of postponing indefinitely my final departure from the stage. But it was just these circumstances which evoked renewed hostile attacks from a puritan public and proved that I was playing with a fire still ablaze and of great danger to me.

I grew frightened and shivered in fear of the sinister power astride my way and calling halt to me. It was gruesome to be harried by a brutal provincial public with such unsportsmanlike enthusiasm. Was I an outlaw, was I nameless and proscribed, the prey of merciless fate that with philistine delight compelled me to surrender?

No wonder that my mind became unhinged owing to these shameful battles. I did not know which way to turn out of this inferno.

At this period of my life the story goes that there were evenings when I, playing a tragic part, suddenly began to turn somersaults, afterwards explaining my behaviour by telling the public I had to practise this art, for it would probably be my future destiny to earn my living as a circus rider as I did as a child. If a somersault went wrong I am said to have apologized with a cynical grimace: "I could do these things a few years ago; I am too old and fat now!"

The decision to turn my back on England and to try my luck anew in America hardened in me. But when I went aboard the *Silas Richards* in Liverpool—it was in autumn 1825—not a trace was left in me of the self-possessed conqueror determined to bend the New World to his will. Embarked a man broken by mental sufferings, disappointed and humiliated, a victim of drink, animated by only one desire; to be allowed in that distant land to find a refuge where he could forget the horrors of hatred and persecution.

CHAPTER XVIII

A SECOND TIME IN AMERICA

THE world is small; the channels of hatred are widespreading like an intricate network.

On my arrival in New York I found that the American public had been informed to the minutest detail about events in London; they did not hesitate in condemning the bombastic foreigner who ventured to show his face again.

My appearance on the stage of the New York Park Theatre before an audience of two thousand visitors aroused the same storm of indignant passion as in Drury Lane. My position was hopeless.

I do not wish to exculpate myself. Yet have there not been other scandals long before mine which pilloried members of London's society? The world is hardly a house of prayer. Members of the highest nobility are human beings as well. It has ever been the privilege of the lower classes to get a sort of moral satisfaction from the exposure of weaknesses, passions and crimes of those who should figure as shining examples. Gleefully they trumpet to the world the offences of those high in rank; with lustful glances they seize the newspapers and special editions where long reports tell of the extremely embarrassing cross-examinations, of the contrition and confusion of the accused and his just conviction. Soon new sensations crowd in from another source and the old ones are thrown aside like discarded rubbish.

Here, however, was a case in which running the gauntlet never seemed to cease. Did nobody understand that I was near the end of my tether; that it was defying all laws of human justice and mercy to lash the crucified with thorny whips time and again?

In deep despair I humiliated myself by an appeal to the public sent to the *New York Advocate*. I wrote:

"I visit this country now under different feelings and auspices than on a former occasion. Then I was an ambitious man, and the proud representative of Shakespeare's heroes; now the spark of ambition is extinct, and I merely ask a shelter in which to close my professional and mortal career. I give the weapon into the hands of my enemies; if they are brave, they will not turn it against the defenceless."

This brutally frank confession exposing a human being to the

deepest humiliation, a human being whose eyes and features now told of extreme suffering, did not miss its effect on the New York public. The attacks of my opponents were silenced. When I appeared before them in the part of Othello, my artistic power unabated, applause and cheers rang through the theatre at the end of the play. What is more, I was obliged to say a few words to those who had most fiercely attacked and pilloried the immoral player.

I thanked them for the great favours shown to me. "In regard to my former conduct," I continued with monotonous voice, looking into space, "I can only express deeply felt regret." I asked them to believe me, if to a great and tense audience I now made confession that during the last few months I had gone through untold sufferings and agony, as a just atonement for the blackest of all sins. I bowed my head—mentally numb and dead—and concluded with the hope and wish that the river of oblivion, Lethe, might wash away my guilt for ever with its waters.

The critic of the *Albion* wrote the following day of the impression created by this appeal:

"The pith of the matter, the pathos and manner of its delivery, and the eloquence of appeal were powerful. The guilty offender stood before us all with the mental endowments which nature had lavished upon him, and which he seemed to deposit at the feet of the audience as a ransom for their lost favour. What a victory did genius gain over prejudice, and what a mass of anger and resentment was sacrificed on its glorious shrine."

From this day my fate in New York was decided. Every night of my appearance yielded up to me new and greater triumphs.

It was as if a kindly deity had dispelled the dark storm-clouds from my horizon.

It will be considered foolhardy by most people that I now decided to play in Boston after the close of my New York engagement, the same Boston which had been so deeply hurt by my deliberate refusal to act. I myself cannot tell what prompted me at that moment to embark on a venture, the result of which must have appeared doubtful and uncertain. Did I feel so secure that I dared to show myself again to a public whose primitive mentality I had already sampled? Or had the wearing conflicts with the public in so many a town both in the old world and in the new affected my mental state to such an extent that I, as Richard III, "like one drunk with wounds" fought on, convinced that although

the sword had been struck from my hands, my will could not be broken?

Finn, the new manager, said that, valuable as my acting in his theatre would have been to him from an artistic point of view, he deemed it advisable to prepare public opinion before my reappearance. Therefore, in an open letter to the *Columbian Sentinel* I asked for the favour of the Boston public, before I started my engagement in their midst.

The letter ran:

"I take the liberty of informing the citizens of Boston, through the medium of your journal, of my arrival, confident that liberality and forbearance will gain the ascendance over prejudice and cruelty. That I have erred, I acknowledge; that I have suffered for my errors and indiscretions, my loss of fame and fortune is but too melancholy an illustration. Acting from an impulse of irritation, I certainly was disrespectful to the Boston public; calm deliberation convinces me that I was wrong. The first step toward the Throne of Mercy is confession—the hope we are taught, forgiveness. Man must not expect more than those attributes which we offer to God."

The effect of these words, however, was not as Finn and myself had anticipated and desired. On the contrary, it was obvious that the Boston public still bore me a grudge and, being excellently informed about my indiscretions, was in no mood to receive the offender with open arms. The town with its sanctimonious arrogance seemed determined to sit in judgement over the foreign intruder instead.

The Boston press poured oil on the flames. As if it had been appointed public guardian of morality, and craving for new sensations, it opened its crusade against the debauched artist with rabid fanaticism. In particular *The Courier* published the following enraged epistle:

"For his ungentlemanly deportment he says he means to apologize. Let us then hear his apology. If it be satisfactory, let him play; if not, insist upon another. For his vices and crimes committed in Europe, it does not belong to us to inflict any other punishment than neglect. He sets up no claim to innocence, to purity of moral character. He asks not to be admitted to our dwellings; he solicits no social intercourse. To such privileges he is no doubt conscious that he has forfeited all claim. But he asks an asylum. No one can sincerely respect him; no one can love him. But everyone can pity while he condemns, and no one can carry his resentment so far as to

drive from the face of the earth the wretched fallen creature on whom the Almighty seems to have set the seal of his displeasure."

Not satisfied with it, *The Courier* fanned the darkest passions of the undisciplined crowd by reminding its readers of my letter to Charlotte Cox written during my former stay in America and read at the court proceedings: "I wish to forget everything connected with America, and do not desire the acquaintance or friendship of any American."

These sentiments were to prove my undoing, although this unjust judgment was only the outcome of despondency and was contradicted by my intimate and valuable friendship with Dr. John William Francis, the New York physician. When the night of my appearance approached, an unwonted excitement seized the Boston public and the theatre was stormed hours before it opened. No women were to be seen among the spectators; an ominous sign!

Before the first act had begun, I, still in my outdoor-clothes, stepped before the curtain to ask the public for a hearing. I was received without further ado with howling and the bombardment of oranges, cabbage leaves and brass buttons. Water syringes and stink bombs were brought into action. A hellish noise roared through the house and made it shake to its foundations. Unable to utter a word, I left the stage with a gesture of despair.

The immense uproar of that night, so decisive a factor in my future, is still echoing in my brain. Yet with the cold objectivity of an impartial onlooker I shall endeavour to recount the course of events, unique in the world history of the theatre.

It was useless to ask for a hearing in the tumult of these seething masses. Kilner, the producer, therefore, appeared in front of the house with a placard showing on one side the words: "Mr. Kean wishes to play!" whilst on the other side could be seen the text: "Shall the play proceed without Mr. Kean?"

Impossible to get a decision. The public roared and gesticulated. But when the play began—*Richard III* had been announced—and Manager Finn appeared in my place, the anger of the cheated masses who had been anticipating a drama within a drama swelled to furious frenzy. The infernal noise sweeping through the house attracted hundreds of outsiders besides, who arbitrarily took possession of the balustrades, of boxes, of the orchestra, yes, even of the stage. The lowest scum of the town were always at hand, when it meant plundering a warehouse or lynching a nigger.

This mob, together with the hysterically excited public, now

stormed the stage and, like a pack of wild beasts, burst open the dressing-room doors to lay hands on me. But the fury of the howling pack knew no bounds when to their disappointment they discovered that I had effected my escape from the wrath of my foes—for in a moment of extreme danger friends had taken me across the theatre courtyard to the house of George Clarke, the prompter; there they were hiding me.

The picture which presented itself, and was confirmed by reliable eye-witnesses, was in its grotesque distortion like that of a lunatic asylum whose inmates had suddenly overpowered their keepers and run amok.

With bestial roar the rabble seizes the theatre weapons—helmets, swords, halberds—and thus fantastically arrayed, they proceed to their task of destruction. Under the strokes of swords, the cuts of halberds and battle-axes, props and scenery collapse. What had been a few minutes before Richard III's palace, the streets of London, the gloomy Tower, are now a heap of rubbish. Mirrors, chandeliers and candelabra clatter in thousands of pieces. The curtains of the boxes are torn in rags. Whole rows of seats in the stalls are lifted out; seats from the upper circles are hurled into the stalls. Stoves are demolished, connecting pipes hanging ghostlike in the air. The iron balustrade of the upper circles gives way and rattles with deafening noise into the depth. Shouting fills the house like the roaring of mighty breakers at high tide; whistling and yelling of a hurricane mingled with the discords of ill-treated trumpets and trombones, and with the hollow lamenting sounds of burst kettledrums: instruments they had stolen from the orchestra room. The climax of this mad frenzy, however, is reached when the gas light fails and the struggle rages on in a darkened house.

With flying hair, features distorted, the manager endeavours to stem the tempest. Only laughter is the answer; he is brutally pushed aside and thrown to the ground. Bruised and bleeding he reaches the open and sees solution only in calling in the police.

The police are powerless. The Riot Act is to be read, but Mayor Quincy who was to have led the attack is nowhere to be found. At last Mr. Justice Whitman appears on the scene of ruin and enforces the law, thus saving the theatre from utter destruction. In spite of this the rabble besieges the building all night long, ready to do their utmost in revenge, though many of those bold scamps do not know themselves what they are avenging. The most savage ring-leaders are not to be deterred. They en-

circle George Clarke's house, for rumour has it that the hated actor is hiding within its walls.

An attack at the door is frustrated by the police, likewise an attempt to enter by the windows with the help of ladders. Curses and maledictions ascend to the stars. Some of the reckless spirits are just about to kindle a fire to smoke out the enemy of America's public morality, when a courageous man hits upon the idea of bringing the masses to their senses by explaining that Kean had flown long ago, but that Mrs. Clarke was expecting her confinement any moment. They surely would have some consideration for the hour of a mother's ordeal.

It works. The dense crowd disintegrates and, as a penetrating rain is setting in, the rabble scatters dejectedly, feeling cheated out of the pleasure of a lynching.

Meanwhile, hidden away in Mrs. Clarke's linen press, I suffered untold agonies. The attacks of the London public, the hostilities of the English provinces, appeared mild in comparison with this barbaric attempt at lynching. Where was the justification for brutally slaughtering an undesirable visitor for the satisfaction of a mob?

Indeed, I should have been accustomed by now to running the gauntlet, but I hardly had the strength to endure this medieval torture. Had I not had the assistance of a few fearless friends, who during the siege of Clarke's house made me unrecognizable by some grotesque disguise, I would, without doubt, have succumbed to the mental tortures of that night and have given myself up to the mob.

Next morning, still in this fantastic make-up, I succeeded, accompanied by two spirited fellows—Perkins and Collamore—in escaping by the back door. Even then I was running the risk of being recognized on my flight. I reached the borders of the town without mishap and fled on foot through the grey mist of an unfriendly, raw morning, leaving behind me all my belongings. Providence was my first stop. From there I journeyed to Worcester, still in abject fear of being followed by fanatical persecutors, till at last I made good my escape by plunging into the safe obscurity of New York.

I entertained but little hope of ever regaining my former confidence in mankind. In this grey, disconsolate state of mind I toyed with thoughts of suicide. A small circle of sincere friends and followers in New York took care of me, however, and helped me to re-establish step by step confidence in myself and in my

artistic calling. Had it not been for them and their unstinted generosity, who knows whether I would have been able to endure the weight of my destiny? With infinite tact and patience, they made me face life again; in particular, it was Dr. John William Francis who, as a nerve specialist, understood human psychology and never wearied of strengthening my self-confidence.

At the beginning of January 1826, on the occasion of a benefit performance for Mrs. Hilson, I dared to appear again for the first time on the stage in New York. The public received me cordially, as if to make amends for the great wrong and humiliation I had suffered at the hands of the Boston people. The spontaneity of their applause had the effect of a pleasant, invigorating bath. I was bewildered, yet delighted. The warmth and sympathy of an unbiased public moved me intensely. Though incapable of uttering even a word of thanks I felt myself reviving and made them aware of my gratitude by playing with accelerated tension and enthusiasm.

In spite of this, my tour in Philadelphia following on, proved that I was condemned ever and again to run the gauntlet in America.

My reception was the most hostile imaginable. Rotten eggs, oranges and buttons greeted my appearance. With bowed head, and in sad and docile silence, I let the storm of hatred pass over me. Very much later, when the noise had abated, I found it possible to raise my voice:

"Friends of the drama, this is your quarrel not mine!" I called to the raving upholders of morality, with grief-stricken voice. My words, or perhaps even more the sincere emotion with which they were spoken, brought about a sudden change in the audience. I was allowed to play my part to the end without the slightest interruption. Here was proof that, as long as I could turn to the public with the poet's words, it was not difficult to hold the spectator spellbound by the play and my representation therein. The audience, so hostile in the beginning, applauded me warmly at the end of the performance. I felt I had gained one of my greatest victories. How much heartache and nervous energy had gone to each of these victories, to each of these ever-increasing and desperate contests, nobody can tell.

For fourteen nights I drew the people of Philadelphia to the theatre. On the last night, which brought me honour and distinctions afresh, I took leave from my audience with these words:

"Ladies and Gentlemen,

"My life has been a chequered one, at one time reaching the

pinnacle of ambition, at another sunk to the lowest ebb of misfortune. I appeared before you at the beginning of my present engagement, sick and dejected by the gloom which the malignity of enemies had thrown around me, anxious and willing to resign the contest; but the kindness of a Philadelphia audience has dispelled these visions of despair, and I hope I shall have the honour early next season of appearing before this kind auditory."

In Baltimore I experienced the same fate as in Boston. The raging public prevented me from appearing. It was as if the words of Shakespeare fulfilled themselves in me:

"Men's evil manners live in brass; their virtues we write in water."

Without doubt, mass suggestion had swept America. There was not the slightest chance of a reconciliation with the injured fanatics. I was obliged to return to New York, crestfallen and miserable. Verily I was overcome by a mood in which I felt up in arms against the whole world.

Despite all this I refused to give in. The boxer, the eternal fighter, was on his feet again before the time was up and, although groggy, he accepted the challenge of the mighty opponent and fought him bout after bout.

Once again I appeared at the Park Theatre in New York, taking turns with the famous Garcia troupe in which, besides Signor Garcia, also his daughter Maria Felicita Garcia—better known as Maria Malibran—appeared. Thus it happened that Signor Garcia sang his Othello one night whilst I appeared as Shakespeare's Othello the following. The success of both events balanced each other. The *Evening Post* wrote:

"The secret of Kean's success here may, I think, be fairly ascribed to two great and powerful causes: his transcendent merits as an actor, and that generous reaction which spontaneously arises in our minds when we think of the bad—even brutal treatment he had experienced. He comes before us as an ill-used and persecuted man, and our sympathies are even involuntarily enlisted in his favour. So far Mr. Kean is lastingly indebted to the Bostonians."

And on my return to Philadelphia the *Aurora and Franklin Gazette* welcomed me with these words:

"This highly gifted tragedian has effected a revolution in the dramatic taste of our city, for even those who were the most severely critical upon his style of acting, now acknowledge its numberless beauties, and freely award to transcendent talent

its just meed of praise. The Baltimoreans and Bostonians are railing against each other for the reception they bestowed upon Mr. Kean. If a leather medal were to be awarded upon this occasion by a society for the suppression of vice and immorality, it would be a knotty point for our friend of the *Commercial Adviser* to decide, which of the *par nobile urbes* should receive it."

Then my compatriot Cowell invited me to play a few nights in Charleston, South Carolina. I accepted without hesitation. But, alas, the press there played the same tune as in all the other towns; they roused the feelings of the people by writing in plain terms: "This luckless fellow ought to be hounded out of the country."

I sailed on a ship to Charleston that, curious to relate, was named *Othello*. My passion for art had changed into dogged obstinacy. When Cowell met me on the pier on my arrival, my simulated strength forsook me. Alarmed and frightened by humiliations and persecutions, I fell on the shoulder of my countryman, imploring him:

"Cowell, for God's sake, I entreat you not to let me play if you think the audience will not receive me. I have not strength of mind or body—look how I am changed since you saw me last—to endure a continuance of the persecutions I have already suffered, and I believe a repetition of them would kill me on the spot."

Cowell in soothing terms persuaded me to go through with the play announced. Perhaps, transfigured by suffering, I gave of the best an artist and man is capable of giving. The public was transported. They seemed oblivious of all animosity and gave me a frantic ovation.

These were halcyon days, indeed, in Charleston.

My engagement at an end, I took quarters in an old, disused fort; there to pass a short time wholly given up to recuperation. Rest and solitude did me good. The idyllic peace of the Southern landscape, the almost unreal, profound security enfolding me, soothed me and endowed me with new strength for future contests.

A tour through Canada proved very successful. In Montreal the public gave me a rousing reception; they insisted that the orchestra play "Rule, Britannia," and when, at last, I appeared I was received with a thundering acclamation that lasted several minutes.

In Quebec my appearance caused even a sensation. The *Gazette of Quebec* wrote:

"It will be a salutary lesson to our fellow subjects on the other side of the Atlantic, how they ought to treat the first actor of the age, and how they ought to receive him when he again presents himself before them. It is to the honour of Canada that it has been the first of British subjects to redeem the character of Englishmen in everything that regards the first of her tragedians."

But increasing illness encroached on my successes. It often happened that I lay ill at an hotel, lonely, a prey to my suffering, eaten up by disillusion and frustrated ambition, lacerated by so many humiliations, despairing of God and mankind and—I will confess—only finding oblivion in drink.

Physically I was almost spent though not forty yet. My eyes spoke the knowledge of suffering, the knowledge of a beyond, where there is no more heartache and conflict. I smiled bitterly when I watched other men of my age, robust, fine fellows enjoying their health and flaunting their vitality.

Branded from birth, I felt now that I was worm-eaten. I had sapped my vitality recklessly, prematurely; I had been my own destroyer. Had I the right to obstruct the way for the more youthful and energetic?

Such were my thoughts when I lay sick and lonely on my bed. Stronger than the body is the mind, tougher than the flesh is our will which dictates how long we can put up a defence against the powers of darkness and of death.

Ever and again I plucked up courage to seize upon parts as upon a protecting armour—parts on the stage and parts in real life—for the older I grew the more, as artist and man, did I rely on make-believe: as a narcotic it took second place only to drink.

In this mood I became actor in a scene that even to an adventurer like me savoured of something new and extraordinary.

Some Red Indians of the tribe of the Hurons, attracted by my name and uncommon publicity, had left their hunting grounds to witness in person one of my performances. Deeply affected by my play they asked the favour of being permitted to pay a visit to the "great white magician."

The red gentlemen—Aharathala, Tswanhootse, Tsione Tlachendahe, and Toonhalissen by name—entered my hotel room with solemn gravity. Seeing that I was lying on a sick-bed they formed a half circle round me. I had assumed an equally solemn pose. With the elaborate ceremonial of their race, like the unspoilt children of nature they were, they gave me thanks for an artistic presentation, which to them seemed nothing short of a miracle.

The visit of the Hurons cheered me greatly and roused in me a new interest in life. I studied my guests' play of feature, the dignity of their measured movements, as you do valuable and interesting models. The praise of these Indians, so grave and at the same time so childlike in their expression, flattered me more than the most exquisite eulogies of duchesses and princesses in London who once courted me openly with their favours. My spirits high, I sat up in bed; full of animation I sang, I recited ballads and Shakespeare's monologues to these children of the prairie, and finally concluded a pact of friendship with them over firewater and clay pipe. When I was well enough to leave my bed, I enjoyed matching myself against them in horsemanship and decided in the end that real happiness on earth can be found only in the negation of all civilization, in the return to, and immersion in, the primitive feelings of a nature folk.

In gratitude for my magic art, the Hurons made me chieftain of their tribe and in the language of their people gave me the name of Alanienouidet. Whereupon I fled from Quebec with them to their hunting grounds in order to abide there for ever.

Driven as if by a mighty impulse, I played this new part. Its magnificence determined me to sacrifice all the grand things the past had lavished on me. I considered it the greatest triumph of the actor's art, when theatre and real life merged, as it were, into each other, when spectator and actor could distinguish no more between reality and make-believe.

Still, was there perhaps another impulse making me fly from my former life? Was it the dark knowledge that a cruel hand was ready to seize me? Was it the desire to snap my fingers at Fate, to escape the eye of retribution through grotesque mummery?

In the hunting grounds of the Hurons the god of the white race rides unknown; torn and scratched by the prairie undergrowth, I, Edmund Kean, spur on my mustang, and galloping before the pursuer, grow one with horse and landscape; superb in my steely play of feature and my superior bearing, as I pull the pistol from my belt and shoot behind me—right into the pale face of the phantom foe.

The anxiety of my Quebec friends was considerable as soon as my mysterious disappearance became known. With the help of a thousand legends from my past, they built up a picture of the actor Edmund Kean as of a bold adventurer who, carried away by his imagination, was not in the least capable of distinguishing between reality and fancy. Had my mind given way? they asked.

Had I, in my delicate state, between clearness and madness, stumbled into an unknown ravine?

All ways and means were used to find me. I was sought in all directions. At last a faint trace led them to my new, self-chosen hiding-place. An expedition was sent out. They found me in a chieftain's wigwam, attired in buffalo skins, a broad collar of bear-skin over my shoulders, the tomahawk in my belt, my head decked with the war eagles' plumes, pearl-embroidered moccasins on my feet, smoking a clay pipe and drinking firewater.

Happy and serene in my new surroundings, I had endeavoured to take root there like a plant of the prairie; and to blend with great Nature which, far from all civilization, formed the decorative background to my dignity as chieftain, like a magnificent stage setting.

It was only due to the persuasive powers of my friends that I agreed to renounce this my newest role.

With tearful eyes and heavy heart, I bade farewell to my Indian friends. I took with me, however, the chieftain garment, also the tomahawk, bow and arrow in memory of my visit to the Red Indians.

On 18th November 1826 I played once more in the Park Theatre of New York, applauded and cheered by friends and admirers. By now, however, I was much handicapped by increasing illness; forebodings of approaching death were haunting me.

Dr. John William Francis, as ever, stood by me and gave me staunch and loyal support. A man of philosophic mind and deep human sympathies, he tried to direct my thoughts into different channels, and to give to my frayed, unstable nerves balance and resilience. He was a devoted friend and admirer of the art of acting. One day, when discussing Lear's madness, he persuaded me to visit the Bloomingdale asylum close to New York, where he was head doctor, to study from the living model the mental confusion of a father broken down and tortured.

Never shall I forget the impression those mad people made on me. Like a troupe of good and bad actors they were performing without choice or purpose. No producer guided them; no text led them to an inevitable or satisfactory end. The hubbub of their shrill voices flowed in all directions as water unchecked by dykes. The fire in their restless eyes burnt there without meaning. The cries and tirades coming from their harassed lips ascended like rockets and burst into nothingness.

After this visit Francis took me to the flat roof of the house to show me with pride the magnificent view of the surrounding

country. My wandering glance took in forty miles of territory, rivers, mountains and valleys. Standing on that height, I was suddenly seized by the desire—perhaps in memory of my former acrobatic feats—to balance myself on my hands along the guttering of the roof. While performing this trick a sinister power made me, as it were, analyse myself. I felt—whether I wished it or not—that I was suddenly transformed into my father's image. He, too, once had balanced himself along the guttering, a prey to melancholia, believing himself alone and forsaken in the world, like one drowned in deep waters. He had found no other way out of his misery but to jump into the depth to be shattered there.

I felt the same irresistible temptation; I saw the hand stretched up to me to drag me down into the uncertain abyss and seized it almost gratefully. I swayed—and would have shared my father's fate, had not the doctor's watchful eye realized the danger in good time. His arm tore me away from the alluring plunge.

Once more I had escaped fate! But the opponent was not so easily intimidated. He could bide his time. And he did.

The news from London about this time reported Elliston's bankruptcy. His successor, an American, Stephen Price, honoured me with an offer to play as a guest at Drury Lane. My mental state was still far from being satisfactory, but I accepted the offer without hesitation. Besides, this decision was rendered easy by the urgent longing for my country, for my people, and by the bitter resentment I nursed against a people who had done me grievous wrong.

On 5th December 1826, I played Richard III in a farewell performance. Then I returned to Europe by the boat *Silas Richards*, the same that once had carried me to the New World.

CHAPTER XIX

BACK IN THE HOME COUNTRY

STEPHEN PRICE had engaged me for twelve performances at Drury Lane. The salary was the highest imaginable for an actor of my time. On 8th January 1827 I appeared before the London public as Shylock for the first time after my absence. The reception was beyond all expectation; not a trace of resentment or unfriendliness. One of the London papers wrote:

“On Monday evening, Mr. Kean made his first appearance since his return from America. The house, long before the rising of the curtain, was crowded to excess, and numbers were compelled to forgo the gratification of witnessing his reception, after the most determined efforts for admittance. The entrances to the pit and galleries were besieged as early as six o’clock, and, on the opening of the doors, the rush may be described as terrific. The boxes also were not exempted from the struggle for places, which plainly denoted how intense was the interest felt on the occasion. The play selected for representation was *The Merchant of Venice*, in reference to the circumstance of Mr. Kean having originally made his debut here as Shylock. His performance exhibited the same masterly conception, and vigorous delineation, as heretofore; and his accustomed points were given with admirable force and effect. At the conclusion of the play Mr. Kean came forward at the call of the house, and was greeted with demonstrations of favour. He retired, in a manner that showed his good sense, by making silent and respectful obeisances.”

Home! After the play I sat in my dressing-room removing my make up. With a sigh of relief I flung the wig of the Venetian Jew into a corner. The applause of the enthusiastic public was still ringing in my ears; they had forgotten their former hostility. It was good to be back in London; I revelled in its atmosphere, enjoyed it with fervour! The past did not matter now, nor the American nightmare that had brutally weighed me down.

With the removal of Shylock’s mask my gaunt face showed furrows left there by suffering and humiliation. Exhausted by the exertions of the evening, I greedily seized the goblet of hot toddy standing in front of me amongst the grease and paint-pots and

other unsightly rubbish. I gulped it down watching meanwhile, with a grimace of aversion, my mirrored face.

Hm! This was the Great Kean, the idol of the public, the highest paid actor of the Old as of the New World, the magician for whose sake whole towns flocked into the theatre! The people, though they would not acknowledge it to themselves, were able through this magician's art, to rise above the antlike monotony of a philistine and colourless world.

A racking cough shook me. My whole frame seemed to be in rebellion. Unable to sit up and in search of some support I clasped the back of a rickety wooden chair. An attendant, in unsuspecting pity, handed me another glass of steaming toddy; I tossed it down—in despair.

The following day I lay sick in bed at my hotel, attended to by strange servants, a defenceless prey to violent attacks of coughing. I became conscious of a terrible loneliness due to the breaking up of my marriage.

I could not afford the luxury of being ill. True, my earnings were still surprisingly high; but my restless temperament ever drove me on to lavish and unnecessary expenditure. I was the slave of my contracts, the slave of managers, producers and impresarios who, though fever burnt my body, dragged me before the footlights to present me to the well-paying public. Under these circumstances there was little else left but to whip up again and again the poor wasted body, to demand its last sacrifice for art, though entire rest and care would have been my saviour.

Stephen Price with his clever advertisements in various papers knew how to entice the public into the theatre. And I simply had to carry on regardless of my indifferent health. One of these announcements would read:

"This eminent actor has produced larger receipts at Drury Lane Theatre, during the few evenings that he has acted since his return from America, than on any former occasion. One hundred and fifty-three pounds were received on Thursday week, at the pit alone; and on Monday evening last, to his Richard the Third, an increased sum. It is said, that Kean received eight thousand pounds on his last trip to America. Price, the Lessee of Drury Lane, paid him upwards of five thousand pounds, as a reward for the exercise of his talents in that hemisphere."

But at the end of my engagement the critics stated:

"Mr. Kean finished his engagement on Tuesday night, in the character of Sir Giles Overreach. Throughout the piece he gave

evident proofs of indisposition, and on the previous evening, after his performance of Richard, he was obliged to be carried off the stage. Mr. Kean's visit to London has certainly not given him fresh strength of body, or improved his mental energies."

I know now that I committed an unpardonable crime against the physical and mental powers still at my command. Sometimes my acting was purely mechanical; I was tired out, a shadow of my former self. And yet sometimes—and then I felt as if a warm, health-giving stream was endowing me with new vitality—I burst the limits of human endurance, and, leaving behind me all earthly frailties, penetrated into realms suffused with the radiance of another world. It can well be imagined that at such times the magic of former days animated my acting and made me more admired than ever.

In May 1827 I returned for a longer period to Drury Lane. My old friend Grattan, the same Grattan whom, in my younger years, I had instructed in fencing, informed me that his love for the stage had led him to write a play and that it was his greatest wish to see it produced, with me in the principal part.

As for years now I had acted almost exclusively in my Shakespeare repertory—the contemporary plays were hardly worth the mention—I felt it my duty at last to appear in a new part before my public. I read Grattan's play, and I frankly admit I was inspired by it.

"Come at once," I wrote to my old friend. "We must discuss your play. One thing I tell you, I am going to play your *Ben Nazir*, the *Saracen* for sure, and I shall have the greatest success of my life in the part."

The memory of this first reunion with Grattan still lingers with me. When the officer entered my room in Hummums' Hotel, Covent Garden, where I had taken up my abode for a short time, I received him sitting up in bed, a buffalo skin spread over me, a huge fur cap trimmed with superb eagle feathers on my head, scalping knife in belt and the tomahawk in my hand. Near me steamed a jug of hot toddy. Two shabbily dressed fellows, who, in God knows what ale-house, had made friends with me, were keeping me company. An artist was about to paint my portrait as chieftain Alanienouidet of the Hurons.

Recalling this incident, I feel rather ashamed of the staginess of a situation which at that time did not seem incongruous to me. I was only aware that real life was slipping away from me fast; I could only cling helplessly to a world of make-believe, whose multicoloured trappings obscured the precipice I dreaded so much.

A nigger boy in fancy livery announced Grattan. I waved the tomahawk, pulled the fur cap from my head, jumped out of bed and fell on my old friend's neck.

After that I went back to bed, pulled from beneath the pillow the manuscript of Grattan's play and assured him solemnly that I had studied my part daily and that I had already mastered the text from A to Z.

But when, a little later, the nigger boy ushered in two ladies behind thick veils, I quickly pushed my friend as well as the painter and the two shabby fellows out of the door, whispering coquettishly the while to Grattan that the lady visitors were the daughters of a High Church dignitary and head over heels in love with me.

Without doubt, I behaved like a youthful rake and a dissolute libertine, although I am now convinced that the shy and nervous expression of my haggard face belied the part I acted then.

Grattan left me disheartened; the sad look in his face which I caught at parting spoke its own language.

"This then is the Great Kean," he may have thought, "this bundle of nerves, chockful of vanity and unquenchable thirst for glory!" Where was the splendour of youth? Where the magnetism of an extraordinary personality? A man aged before his allotted time continuing the role of a Don Juan. But, alas, beneath the paint and powder lurked the poor, pitiable mummer!

The rehearsals of *Ben Nazir* began. The drama takes place in the eighth century, at the time of the French trouble with the Moors. The scene is a castle in the Pyrenees. I was cast as Munuza Ben Nazir, a Saracen chieftain. At the first rehearsal I read my part, but I outlined clearly and definitely how I wanted the character to develop. Grattan, who had been listening in the dark stalls, afterwards came and congratulated me. He had high hopes of the effect of the play on the public. From any further rehearsals I stayed away, giving the reason that I wished to study my part more intensely on my own. It could better be done in quietude and seclusion than in attending irritating and exerting rehearsals.

In reality, however, an inexplicable sensation had taken hold of me. The space behind the scenes seemed like a hostile, bewitched forest, and the world of the boards without which I once could not live, filled me with secret horror.

I threw myself even more passionately into the study of this new part; with all my might I clung to it like a drowning person to a raft.

At that time I could be seen frequently in Kensington Gardens or in a boat on the Thames memorizing the text of *Ben Nazir*. I was body and soul in my work and my optimism sparkled like fireworks.

When I finally stated that I was ready with my part, the play was announced to the London public. Even now I could not be moved to attend the final rehearsals. My strange attitude caused surprise. I was either unpardonably obstinate or felt so sure of myself—so it was said—that I was not willing to expose the secret of my art to my colleagues before the première. Even this point of view, putting the interest of an individual before that of the community, would have been inexcusable.

The first night arrived. The theatre was overcrowded; the excitement of the audience intense. But when the call-boy tapped on my dressing-room door he found me in a state of utter prostration in mind and body.

"For God's sake, Mr. Kean!" he shouted, "the signal to begin has already been given. The audience are waiting—and you! . . ."

I stammered something inaudible. A grey mist swam before my eyes, I seemed semi-conscious. I was aware of one thing only: that my artistic will, and with it the resilience of my nerves, had given way, that I had capitulated before a horrible, unspeakable fear, such as I had never known in all my life.

The call-boy, in his dismay, ran for Price. Alarmed, the manager hurried to my dressing-room, only to find confirmed what the boy had reported.

"Pull yourself together, Kean!" said Price and patted me soothingly on the shoulder. "I have sent for the doctor; a few drops of a sedative—you will see—and you will be calmer."

I only mumbled dejectedly that it was utterly impossible for me to appear on the stage. He could see for himself—a nervous breakdown!—then I sobbed quietly and unreservedly.

Price, in desperation, pressed me more and more. "Unthinkable to send the public away!" My colleagues came, one after the other. Anxious, full of genuine sympathy, they endeavoured to steady me, to restore the old confidence in myself. Grattan stood leaning against my dressing-table motionless, pallid with anxiety. He was alarmed about his play, alarmed about his friend who was in imminent danger of a collapse.

The united efforts of all my friends finally succeeded in making me go on the stage. As the curtain rose—the patience of the public had been put to a severe test, indeed—I was seen standing before them in a magnificent oriental costume with my arms crossed

over my chest. My eyes, large and mournful, rested a long while on the people in the stalls. The audience seemed much affected and greeted me with stormy applause.

Then the play began—a tragedy within a tragedy. What the puzzled public did not comprehend immediately, and what horrified his colleagues behind the scenes as well as his producer, and not least of all the unhappy author, was the unmistakable realization that Kean, the great Edmund Kean, had lost his memory; that England's most celebrated actor was standing on the stage with glassy eyes, helpless, perplexed, muttering incoherent fragments which his ear caught from the distressed prompter.

Nobody on earth can realize what took place in my innermost soul during these moments of excruciating torture. But I knew the meaning of this hopeless situation; I sensed fate behind me, a shadow bigger than life size; it had overtaken me at last; I felt its icy-cold paralysing hand upon me, throttling me. I shivered, cold sweat stood out in drops on my forehead. I stammered, gabbled my part, omitted whole passages of the dialogue and spoke in its place words which had nothing to do with Grattan's play.

In an atmosphere of oppressed silence the curtain fell. The public was still in ignorance of what was actually happening on the stage. During the second act, however, they were slowly realizing that there was now acting in the cold footlights only the shadow of the man who had inspired millions with his supreme art. The curtain dropped. Restlessness and bitter disappointment in the audience! Price sent the producer in front of the curtain to crave indulgence for me. Mental exhaustion, physical suffering, he explained, had taken their toll, had weakened the memory of the celebrated actor to such a degree that he hardly could do justice to the author's work; only under the greatest difficulties would he be able to carry on his part.

I fought valiantly against my own weakness. Again I stood on the stage and saw beneath me in the dark auditory the many-headed crowd staring at me, as I thought, in cold hostility; and I felt that the most gruesome fate that ever can befall an actor had caught me in its grip; a fate which some of us perhaps have visualized in agonizing dreams, when in a nightmare we have stood in the glaring footlights and a voice called to us: "Play your part!" but no coherent sentence, not even a single word would come from our lips.

As one escaping from the gallows, I rushed through the text to the end of the play. Here and there I clung to the words which

the prompter imploringly shouted at me. In clearer moments I was aware of the tension in the audience and that they perhaps sensed the true gist of the drama; thus, when I, in faint realization of my own condition, stammered:

“Day of my life! and can’st thou be my last?
Open, ye Heavens, one moment. Let my gaze
Transpierce the veil that shrouds me from myself.
But hold! Why search futurity? Why look
For further life? Enough, whene’er I die,
I live for ever. . . .”

Once more I lost the thread, spoke confused, incoherent nonsense, arousing the displeasure of the startled audience. With leaden tongue and parched throat, I fought for each single word. With trembling hands, I groped through the dense wilderness meeting me everywhere.

“Oh, miserable man! presumptuous nothing—
Plaything of destiny—fore-doomed by fate . . .”

I cried in despair. And then in apathetic resignation my lips stammered:

“How still is everything! a death-like calm
Hangs as a pall upon the pulseless earth;
My voice dies hollowly upon the air,
And echo fears to answer me. There is
No breeze to speak to me. It is as though
Nature, as well as man, abandons me.”

Then the curtain fell for the last time; an icy silence lay over the theatre; a verdict of condemnation from the audience. Grattan came hurrying behind the scenes just as I, my arms round the shoulders of two stagehands, was staggering from the stage like one crucified. Grattan tactfully stepped back, but I had already recognized him. Guilty, I bowed my head, murmuring feebly:

“I have ruined a fine play and myself; I cannot look you in the face.”

The following day a London paper, partly absolving me from the disastrous failure, wrote:

“On Monday evening, a new Tragedy, under the title of *Ben Nazir, the Saracen*, was murdered by the actors, and mercilessly damned by the audience at this house. So unequivocal was the disapprobation manifested towards this unfortunate piece, that a lengthened criticism of its demerits is totally unnecessary. It

seems to have possessed very little novelty of plot, or originality of language; but, in justice to the author, it is but fair to state that the actors were quite as much to blame as he. Indeed, Mr. Kean, so far from studying his part, had not even taken the pains to learn half of the speeches set down for him, and therefore delivered broken and disjointed sentences, which puzzled the audience exceedingly to make out his meaning."

But another paper remarked about my breakdown:

"A contemplation of the wreck of great energies is always mournful, but in the present instance it reached a point which was absolutely afflicting."

CHAPTER XX

BEFORE SUNSET

AT this point I have to interpolate a short survey of Mary's life. Not because the reader has a claim to being informed about her further days, but because, in the first instance, I feel, if perhaps only half-consciously, that there exist bonds between certain people which could not be wholly severed by the most brutal violence.

That I had robbed Mary of her life's content and meaning, I was only too well aware. Although I sincerely repented and would have given anything to retrace my steps in that respect, I knew of no miracle that could wipe out things done nor the shadow which lay over the past.

Mary has suffered unspeakably through my conduct and I know she will suffer to her last breath. She lived in strict seclusion, broken by her fate and yet—could it be otherwise?—clinging with all her fibres to her faithless husband. Reduced to a pitiable state of health, nearly bed-ridden, and yet with close attention and sympathy she followed from her retreat my further career, my successes and, alas, my breakdown. It is true, she was free from cares about her daily life; I had done my duty in amply providing for her. But she feared a day might come when I would not be capable of assisting her any longer.

In the meantime, as I said, she suffered no hardships or privations. My income up till then had been princely. Thus it was also self-evident that our son Charles had been sent to Eton, enjoying an education equal to the sons of aristocratic families.

It was Mary's wish that he should become a clergyman. I, however, insisted one day on his entering the navy. I even procured for him a vacancy as a cadet in the East India Company.

Charles, whose youthful fantasy was fired by tales of distant countries and adventures, was not at all averse to my proposition. But Mary, afraid of an even more lonely life, implored him not to leave her, even at the risk of incurring my anger, so losing the yearly payments to her.

This dilemma may have driven Charles to hit upon the idea of following his father's example and of becoming an actor.

The scene between Charles and me, when my son told me of this decision, is still fresh in my memory. It was a scene full of

dramatic tension and temperament worthy of the old as of the young Kean.

Charles deemed it advisable to convey his decision in person. The boy, then sixteen years old, came to me; he was at great pains to hide his shock, even his horror at the change in me; he found his father aged, exhausted, a prey to a grave malady.

I soon felt that the vitality and temperament in that youth were equal to mine, when I myself was young and full of the zest of life.

"I thank you, Father, for all you have done for me," he said in well-restrained excitement.

I smiled paternally:

"As a cadet of the East India Company you carry your baton in your knapsack."

Charles looked at me, determination in his eyes.

"I cannot accept your present."

I was startled. With keen observation I let my eyes rest on this youth who was my son.

"It is not a present, understand me well. It is due solely to my extensive connections and my popularity with society that the East India Company——"

Here Charles broke in:

"I tell you, Father, it is no good. I am not going to be a sailor."

"Not going to be a sailor?"

"In consideration of my mother——"

My features showed disappointment.

"Hm—! Your mother has made different plans for you?" I asked coldly. "Does she still see you on the pulpit in the gown of a priest?"

"I am not speaking of my mother's wishes. I myself——"

My lips were tightly pressed together. My gaze fixed on the young lad before me. He blushed.

"And what—if I may ask—are your plans?"

The high colour in the face of the sixteen years old had given place to pallor. He stood before me, boldly his eyes met mine.

"If you want to know, I am going to be an actor."

He seemed to relax, as if glad to have confessed this secret.

I am ashamed to admit that in comparison with the manly assurance and dignity of this boy, I must have cut a rather unhappy figure in my sudden temper and lack of control. I picked up a China dish, close at hand, and hurled it to the floor as I jumped up. With rolling eyes and anger in my face, I shouted:

"Actor? There is only one actor by the name of Kean—and that is—I!"

Charles was not to be intimidated by the staginess of my conduct. Very calmly he replied:

"I am not going to detract from your fame, Father. But I think I can make my way on the stage quickest so as to be able to support mother when she is old."

With long strides I paced the room, numb and bewildered.

"I have been hearing the word Mother, Mother all the time. You obviously never thought that you should consider your father as well."

Charles looked at me, disconcerted.

"I did not know that you needed assistance. But my mother—"

I flew at him without restraint:

"Do as you please! But I shall never give my permission for you to become an actor. Never!"

Thus we parted in discord: I, suspicious, jealous of my own blood, intent on the uniqueness of my name, my fame; my son with the confidence and optimism of his youth, perhaps also with the stubbornness which he had inherited from me.

Charles prepared himself for his self-chosen career. One day after I had quarrelled with Stephen Price over my reappearance at Drury Lane and had gone over to Covent Garden, Price quickly engaged the sixteen-year-old boy for his theatre, well calculating that the London public would storm the box-office from mere curiosity.

The public actually was all agog. Whilst I, after my recovery, appeared as Shylock at Covent Garden, Charles made his *début* as Young Norval in John Home's tragedy *Douglas* at Drury Lane. He was encouraged by the audience in a kindly manner. The press, however, volunteered the good advice to the beginner to go to the provinces first, there to win his spurs.

I must admit I read these criticisms about my son with a certain amount of satisfaction. It is true, he was of my flesh and blood; yet it irked me that he should expose the name Kean to dangers from a changeable public and self-righteous critics. This intolerable position and the tacit admission that sickness had impaired my mind and body, strengthened my egotism and made me afraid of any rival, old or new.

I was, of course, aware that for years to come I had nothing to fear from competition with my own son. The actor in me heaved a sigh of relief; the actor fighting jealously night after night, year after year to vindicate the place that his art and public favour had assigned to him.

In spring 1828, when I was forced to rest again from the over-

exertions of my arduous profession, and was staying at my country-seat on the Isle of Bute, Charles happened to play in Glasgow near by. This fact, together with my prolonged illness, may have decided Charles to visit me and to ask my pardon for his selfish and conceited action.

I was greatly moved by the spontaneity of this gesture; because it came from one who had inherited a good deal of my obstinacy, and also, because my own hard-headedness had been mellowed by advancing disease. Thus I unhesitatingly yielded to a tender scene of reconciliation. I did even more: I appeared at my son's benefit performance in Glasgow as Brutus in John Howard Payne's tragedy. Charles played the part of Titus.

In a moving scene of this play, Brutus has to embrace Titus and to exclaim: "Embrace thy wretched father!" I must have spoken these words with great emphasis, for the audience, who evidently saw there a similarity to my private life, burst into a thundering roar of applause. I am not ashamed to admit that the eternal mummer in me responded gladly to the flattery of this unexpected acclamation; I could not resist whispering with satisfaction to Charles: "Charley, we're doing the trick!"

I feel urged to say here a few words about the general fate of the professional actor. In time it only too frequently happens that creative experience is replaced by mere routine, tragi-comic, if not ridiculous in its effect. I myself was not immune from this fate. The storms of an adventurous life had hardened me; the sensitiveness, the instinctive sureness of my earlier days, the wonderful facility of sliding into different characters—gifts nature so generously had showered on me—had of necessity been blunted. In the long run nobody perhaps can ever escape this danger of sinking from inspired artistry to mere artisanship. Edmund Kean in his youth—if you'll permit the older Kean to say so without seeming to blow his own trumpet—used all arts in the theatre as ministers to his glorification; and his supreme art triumphed over the producer, the scenic artist, the lighting expert, the musician and even over the poet himself. With the impertinence of a clown let loose, I reached out for the stars, convinced that they were just good enough to serve me as a buttonhole. The public? It has to be bent to our will, as the others have been bent! Because we are in need of it, as we need the air to live; because only through its breath can our spark be kindled; because the actor's art is the answer to the silent question of the enthralled crowd; because the public is not the least part of the mystic sum which, as the theatre, constitutes a world.



EDMUND KEAN ESQ.

CHILLER

WILLIAM

William Bennett

THE HURON CHIEF EDMUND KEAN
Painted by Frederick Meyer

In later years I did not take obstacles in the same bold stride nor with the same radiant unconcern. Disillusioned by the knowledge of what lies behind the scenes, I had lost a good deal of my self-assurance; whereas in my youth, I was unhampered by doubts and questions, later I was assailed by them.

What monstrous art is this that expects her priests to be inspired on hearing the command to start and to be silent again with the fall of the curtain? What other art has to submit to such demands from outside: At this point or at this word you have to die!—though one is convinced of one's right to live on!

Is the actor counted among the creative artists? Why then is he not permitted to break the bonds with which the writer has shackled him? To continue his own life as he desires? To erect his own world, to display his own emotions instead of those of the dramatist, or of the character in the play? If a man is a volcano, why is he not allowed to use his superabundant power in destroying the world which he has built up for himself?

It can be seen that I was approaching a danger zone. In place of reality and instinct stood now the idea, in place of unself-conscious, impulsive acting stood painful self-analysis. The problematic side of this damnable art took complete possession of me: an art which offers violence to all other arts, an art in which power of expression does not spring from the word only, according to the writer's intent, but equally from the inner force of the actor, from the magnetism of his own personality. Through these doubts I lost my actor's equilibrium which had been such an asset in my unquestioning youth.

In deep resentment I chafed against the limits of my sphere and, as I sensed the insecurity of my position, the conviction of being one of God's chosen became stronger in me so that I insisted on my being regarded as monarch not only of the boards but of a public that gratefully submitted to my tyranny.

The change of William Hazlitt's critical attitude towards me during the years should have been a sufficient warning to me. I did not heed it. To-day, while looking over some old papers, I see clearly the admonition of a friend and fellow-fighter; too late I realize how carelessly and ignominiously I allowed such treasures to escape me.

As early as 1821, dwelling on my first appearance at Drury Lane, Hazlitt wrote with remarkable sincerity:

"I had been told to give as favourable an account as I could. I gave a true one. I am not one of those who, when they see

the sun breaking from behind a cloud, stop to ask others whether it is the moon. Mr. Kean's appearance was the first gleam of genius breaking athwart the gloom of the stage, and the public have since gladly basked in its ray, in spite of actors, managers, and critics."

And later Hazlitt was on my side as well when he wrote in *The Liberal*:

"Mr. Kean has a heart in his bosom, beating with human passion (a thing for the great 'to fear, not to delight in!'), he is a living man, and not an artificial one. How should those, who look to the surface, and never probe deeper, endure him? He is the antithesis of a court-actor. His overt manner must shock them, and be thought a breach of all decorum. They are in dread of his fiery humours, of coming near his Voltaic Battery—they choose rather to be roused gently from their self-complacent apathy by the application of Metallic Tractors."

But owing to the fiasco of *Ben Nazir*, the aftermath of all those tragic adventures and the publicity of my case in the Cox-affair, Hazlitt, too, lost faith in my artistic future. His laconic statement in *The Examiner* cut me deep:

"Mr. Kean, the 'bony prizer' of the stage, who has knocked all other reputations and his own on the head!"

It can be easily understood that, in my sad plight and highly nervous state of mind, I groped for a possible escape from this quagmire into which I had brought myself by frivolity. I saw this escape in a visit to Paris, in a series of performances there. I failed to take into account the fact that the Parisians having been used to the cold declamatory style for scores of years, would not fully appreciate my passionate outbursts. I dared not admit to myself that the heyday of my youthful conquests lay long behind me, and that I was a different man from the one expected in the imagination of a French public.

Talma, the Garrick of the French stage, once said:

"Actors and women should never be dated. We are old and young according to the characters we represent."

Very well, I thoroughly agreed on this point with my great colleague and left the English coast with the assurance of a conqueror.

The curiosity of the French public to see me was great. A great deal had been talked and written about Kean the artist and man. Thus it was considered merely in good taste to have seen him. I played Richard, Othello, Shylock, Lear, and Sir Giles Overreach to crowded houses. Yet the Paris public mustered nothing but

an amiable smile and a tactful surprise for my interpretations.

Hazlitt tried to explain this phenomenon of my failure, when he wrote later on:

"We do not wonder at Mr. Kean's want of success in Paris. As they do not like or understand Shakespeare, it is not to be supposed that they should like or understand anyone who goes near to represent him, or who gives anything more than a trite version or modernized paraphrase of him.

"An actor's face 'should be as a book where one may read strange matters'. This would be an inexpressible offence in France, where there is nothing strange, and where all must appear upon the surface or be kept quite out of sight, on the score of decency and good manners.

"Mr. Kean stands alone—is merely an original; and the French hate originality: it seems to imply that there is some possible excellence or talent that they are without! Beside it appears that they expected him to be a giant. *Mon Dieu qu'il est petit!*—as if this was an insuperable bar to his bestriding the theatric world like a Colossus. He is diminutive, it is true: so was the Little Corporal; but since the latter disappeared from the stage, they have ceased to be the Great Nation."

Although Paris showed me the utmost civility and tact I keenly felt that my guest performances were the reverse of success. Hence no wonder that I suffered from the lack of warmth and enthusiasm in the audience—though I would not admit it to myself—and yielded only too willingly to the temptation to drown my disappointment in spirits.

Once when a crowded audience awaited me to play Othello I seemed to have vanished from the earth. A search-party at last discovered me contentedly drinking cognac in the Café Anglais. On being told a great house expected me, I replied, having already drunk too much brandy:

"Blast it! I don't care a fig."

"But," cautioned the manager, "the Duchess de Berri has arrived."

With a cynical grimace I cut him short and haughtily answered:

"I am not a servant of the Duchess!" Turning to the waiter I demanded: "More brandy!"

Finally, owing to the gallant pleading of the manager, I consented to resume my performance. But the public becoming aware of my intoxication soon met me with obvious animosity. The following night the house was empty. I saw myself compelled to abandon my performances and to return to England.

CHAPTER XXI

OPHELIA BENJAMIN

I WILL now turn to a chapter which should not be withheld from the reader, although, even more than my love for Charlotte Cox, it will condemn Kean the man. It would be easy to cut out this scene and turn to the last act of my life's drama. Yet, what constitutes the value and meaning of an autobiography, if not the relentless honesty of the writer?

Thus, with a heavy heart I take up my pen anew to continue my story.

In January 1829 I was once more obliged to interrupt my activities and to retire to my country-seat on Bute. My friends and followers were much perturbed, the more so as I had, a short time before, fallen for the wiles of an unscrupulous woman to whose influence I readily submitted.

I mentioned before, the study and knowledge of woman's mentality ever remained a closed book to me, although women at all times played an important part in my life. It may have been due to the fact that the most desired women fell to my share without any effort on my part. If one is spoiled and flattered by princesses as well as their ladies' maids—to whom one personifies the glamour of a stage-hero even in real life—if one can hardly rid oneself of the favours of admiring females who, like locusts, swarm through doors and windows, it is so easy to be dazzled by the glitter, to yield to a seductive perfume rather than seek spiritual beauty—which is rarely paraded openly.

Ophelia Benjamin was Irish. Her picture remains in my memory as that of a young woman with strong teeth, a good chin and a healthy sensuality. Her immense vitality attracted me. Obviously I saw in her that which I possessed no more. I clung to her realizing my own weakness and my impending doom.

There were people who, from the onset, recognized Ophelia Benjamin's worthless egotism. I refused with desperate obstinacy to listen to their warning.

A woman of such seductive beauty—so I argued—stands beyond good and evil. She is Eve personified and her unfathomable depth, her cunning allurements as well as the charm of her smile, the silken smoothness of her skin, has come from Heaven itself.

I say it again. Woman ever was and ever will be the fate of

man. Deliberations and practical considerations are of little or no avail, when our blood is on fire and we are enslaved by our desires. A woman might descend from the moon, she might spring from the very scum of the people, once she is there, something inexplicable in her speaks and determines a life, a fate.

I knew nothing of Ophelia's earlier life. She came into my orbit one day, maybe as a minor actress, or a strolling player like my mother. Our eyes met and with the certainty of a somnambulist I felt we were destined for each other.

Ophelia Benjamin took possession of me as a beautiful woman does of a necklace which she puts round her neck. Now that this oppressive incubus is only a faint echo to me, I am aware that she tolerated Edmund Kean, the man, because she made use of Edmund Kean, the artist, as a stepping-stone for her ambitions. Nothing more.

My secretary and friend Phillips who, meeting her daily, had sufficient opportunity to discover her true character behind the smooth mask, wrestled with her, as it were, for my very soul. Phillips in our years of work together had become very dear to me. He had lived through my greatest triumphs at my side; he had watched my decline as well. If there ever was such a thing as a mirror reflecting the most secret traits of one confronting it, Phillips was such a mirror.

Destiny now forced him to stand by idly and watch, in the loneliness and fairylike peace of the Scottish country-seat, a snake threatening his friend and master with its venomous fangs. It incited him to a fierce fight. In the beginning it was fought out unknown to me. It was a silent matching of powers, a crossing of rapiers as their hostile glances met. Here stood two opponents facing each other, full well knowing that there was no compromise for them, only a final quitting of the arena by one or the other.

Ophelia's tactics were to prejudice me against Phillips by all the seductive arts at a woman's command. Phillips, on the other hand, well aware that a man in love is deaf as well as blind to all warning, however well meant, collected his material with tenacious perseverance, ultimately to deal an effective blow.

The atmosphere in Bute was as if charged with electricity. Ophelia tried to exasperate Phillips so as to make him come out into the open. But he, the wiser of the two, eluding her attacks, remained patiently on the defensive.

Ophelia's brutal temperament was no match for such tantalizing tactics. Her dislike of Phillips made her confront him and cause a lively scene. Sitting by the fireside in a high-backed armchair,

hidden from the eyes of the wrestlers, I accidentally became a witness of this embarrassing conflict.

"Why do you constantly spy on me?" I heard her scolding in a piercing voice which stood in peculiar contrast to the exquisite purity of her features. "Are you a paid spy? Have I committed a crime? I object strongly to this obtrusion; to your clumsy anxiety about a man of whom nobody can take better care than I!"

Phillips restrained himself with difficulty.

"As Mr. Kean's secretary I am perfectly aware of my duties," he remarked with quiet decision. "If I feel apprehensive at my master's confidences too readily given, nobody in the world could prevent me from doing what in my opinion is right. Not even you, Miss Benjamin!"

"Oh really!" shrieked Ophelia in irritation. "You seem to misjudge my position in this house as well as you misjudge your own. It hardly counts how long you have been in your master's service. To whom does he give his confidence is alone of consequence."

I heard Phillips take a deep breath. The hour of decision in this battle had come.

"There are people," he said, "who give their confidence to their fellow men in a naïve and childlike manner. They see only the surface; they know nothing of the underlying thoughts which animate others."

"Ha, ha! You think you are a thought reader, do you not?" sneered Ophelia. "It is high time, I think, that I should warn Edmund about an intriguer calling himself a friend of his."

"Indeed, it is high time," retorted Phillips with voice raised, "that the world should know who is poisoning Edmund Kean's life; yes, poisoning it with egotism, brutality and basest greed of gain!"

"This is unpardonable!——"

"Or must I perhaps enlighten you, Miss Benjamin, who it is that squanders the Master's fortune and, animated by gain only, pitilessly threatens Kean with the loss of his entire fortune? Yes, Kean who lifted you from your miserable surroundings and made you what you are!"

"How dare you? You, you——"

Phillips had regained his composure:

"Do not think for one moment that a woman of your calibre can intimidate me! You are brutal and primitive. But stupid!"

"Oh!——"

"Stupid, indeed, very stupid! And you belong to those para-

sites of whom one can rid oneself by force only. I shall tell Kean, I shall warn him——”

At this moment I rose from the armchair and stood, pale from grief, between the combatants.

Ophelia, with ingenious rapidity, adjusted herself to this new situation. She turned on me:

“Why don’t you come to my help? Why don’t you bid him be silent; he abuses me—yes—abuses me in the most impertinent manner; he trails my honour in the dust! I sacrificed myself to tend you—I followed you to this detestable and tedious loneliness, whilst all London is waiting for me. Do you allow me to be grossly insulted here by a servant? If you do not take my part instantly and dismiss this overbearing person, you’ll force me to leave your house and expose you to an uncertain and dangerous fate.”

Almost stunned by the onslaught of her words I raised my hand beseechingly. Unspeakable grief swept over me. I felt bowed down by care and guilt. My heart told me that Phillips, this honest fellow and comrade of long years’ standing, was in the right.

“Ophelia, I implore you—speak the truth,” I faltered, “are you playing with me? Am I only good enough to supply your needs in money, to satisfy your greed? Was I deceived when I told myself that you loved me? that you would be ready, if fate ordained, to follow me into poverty?”

Ophelia’s features underwent a sudden change. Hatred and vindictiveness became amiability, coquetry and silver peals of laughter. This superb woman, with the skin of milk and roses such as only Irish girls can boast of, fell on my neck wantonly and shut my mouth with passionate kisses.

“Don’t ever speak like that again, Edmund! Do you hear me? Ever, ever! Do you not realize that we belong to each other, that no power on earth can separate us? Why will you always listen to the gossip and whispers of others? Nothing but envy, jealousy and petty intrigue! Holding me in your arms, do you not feel that I am living only for you? Only and only for you?”

The lusty youth pulsing through this strong, healthy woman seemed to pervade me and fill me with discordant tremors of passion.

Byron once said: “I fear one lies more to one’s self than to anyone else.” Looking back and visualizing the gloomy scene in Wood Cottage at Bute I can see clearly how true his words were.

The will to be happy was uppermost in me, and therefore I became a liar to myself; although I felt that—alas—behind the

apparent happiness lurked already the shadow of a harsher doom.

With a feeling of complete surrender I gazed at this enchanting woman, so like the Circe of old. I glanced helplessly at my friend Phillips' sad face. In the welter of my emotions I was unable to come to any decision.

It came from Phillips, whose love and worship for me commanded him to make an end to this undignified situation. He left my house to which so many profound memories had bound him.

When Phillips' letter bidding me farewell was given to me, my hand trembled. My secretary for long years, my tested friend saying good-bye to me! I read it and meditated in bewilderment. I had a vision: the beautiful serpent Ophelia was standing behind me reading with a triumphant smile these bitter lines of a "servant".

With heavy conscience I retired to my room, crushed by a feeling of deep shame and degrading enslavement. I knew Phillips was in the right, knew that I, with open eyes, let Ophelia make a tool of me. I did not seem to have the strength to break my chains; but I forced myself to send an answer to my friend and companion from which perhaps spoke the nobler part of my nature:

"Dear Phillips,

"I am shocked, but not surprised. In error I was born, in error I have lived, in error I shall die. That a gentleman should be insulted under my roof creates a blush I shall carry with me to my grave; and that you are so in every sense of the word is unquestionable, from education, habits, and manners. It is too true that I have fostered a worm until it has become a viper; but my guilt is on my head. Farewell.

"Yours,

EDMUND KEAN"

Phillips had left my house. But happiness and serenity shunned my threshold. Ophelia cooed over me as before, yet the unreserved trust which I had given her would not return. Not enough that Ophelia was outdoing me in squandering my resources, she did not even shrink from contracting debts behind my back the payment of which was not always an easy task to me.

Soon discords and quarrels between us became the order of the day, often followed by shameful scenes. The severance of the ties which held me to this woman, was a painful but indispensable operation.

Ophelia, without doubt, beginning to realize that by this time our life together had become untenable, left me one day without a word of farewell. With the shamelessness of a heartless coquette she snatched what she could of valuables from my house. Then she vanished from my life the same way as she had come into it. I never saw her again.

I admit that I made "Edmund Kean's last will" in despair and sudden passion; it is a document laying open the anguish of the hour beginning:

"The villainy of the Irish strumpet Ophelia Benjamin has undone me and though I despise her, I feel life totally valueless without her; I leave her my curses. . . ."

This testament was never completed. Nausea at my ruined life robbed me of the last ounce of strength.

I will not speak of the great havoc Ophelia Benjamin had caused in my earthly possessions. Such damages can easily be repaired. But the mental wounds she dealt me were too deep ever to be healed.

I stood alone, with empty hands in utter despair. I knew I had lost infinitely more than a loved one: self-esteem, trust, above all the buoyancy so much needed by an artist, if he is to believe in his art and in himself.

Could the spark still fire the public? Could my voice, more cracked and raucous year by year, still reveal to them the profoundest mystery of my art?

I doubted myself. Yet, a slave to my luxurious habits, I was forced to finish my career like a meteor, did I not want to face ruin and starvation before long. I went from town to town, a wandering magician; on many a night a juggler, who with his dexterity deceived his public; now and then, however—and I felt it with gratitude—shining with my former vigour, a spirited fighter who believed in Percy Hotspur's motto:

*. . . if we live, we live to tread on kings;
If die, brave death, when princes die with us!*

Whereas in my youth I had trodden the open road from tavern to tavern, from barn to penny-gaff, I was living now the life of the travelling virtuoso who, when not actually standing on the stage, had to be contented with the impersonal world of good or bad hotels.

The sensation that I was suspended over a precipice still persisted. I felt alive only when I could change into the figures of my Master Shakespeare, grateful to be able to interpret his poetic

fantasies—though my own life held little of poetry and fantasy. To fill this void in me, the result of my nature and conduct, there remained ever the same devastating remedy: drink. A masterful narcotic, vice and salvation combined.

One should not consider it a wanton excuse for my tendency to this vice, to this form of happiness, the fact that I quote the words of William Hazlitt, this wise, indulgent and broad-minded man. Of the actor and of his extravagances he writes:

“Actors are accused as a profession of being extravagant and intemperate. While they are said to be so as a piece of common cant, they are likely to continue so. But there is a sentence in Shakespeare which should be stuck as a label in the mouths of the beadles and whippers-in of morality: ‘The web of our life is of a mingled yarn: our virtues would be proud if our vices whipped them not, and our faults would despair if they were not cherished by our virtues.’

“With respect to the extravagance of actors, as a traditional character, it is not to be wondered at: they live from hand to mouth; they plunge from want into luxury; they have no means of making money breed, and all professions that do not live by turning money into money, or have not a certainty of accumulating it in the end by parsimony, spend it. Uncertain of the future, they make sure of the present moment. This is not unwise. Chilled with poverty, steeped in contempt, they sometimes pass into the sunshine of fortune, and are lifted to the very pinnacle of public favour, yet even there cannot calculate on the continuance of success, but are, ‘like the giddy sailor on the mast, ready with every blast to topple down into the fatal bowels of the deep!’ Besides, if the young enthusiast who is smitten with the stage, and with the public as a mistress, were naturally a close hunk, he would become or remain a city clerk, instead of turning player. Again, with respect to the habit of convivial indulgence, an actor, to be a good one, must have a great spirit of enjoyment in himself, strong impulses, strong passions, and a strong sense of pleasure, for it is his business to imitate the passions and to communicate pleasure to others. A man of genius is not a machine. The neglected actor may be excused if he drinks oblivion of his disappointments; the successful one, if he quaffs the applause of the world, and enjoys the friendship of those who are the friends of the favourites of fortune, in draughts of nectar. There is no path so steep as that of fame; no labour so hard as the pursuit of excel-

lence. The intellectual excitement inseparable from those professions which call forth all our sensibility to pleasure and pain, requires some corresponding physical excitement to support our failure, and not a little to allay the ferment of the spirits attendant on success. If there is any tendency to dissipation beyond this in the profession of a player, it is owing to the state of public opinion, which paragraphs like the one we have alluded to are not calculated to reform; and players are only not so respectable as a profession as they might be, because their profession is not respected as it ought to be."

CHAPTER XXII

MEMORY, THE FIRST OF GODDESSES

IN February 1830, for the first time after the ill-fated *Ben Nazir*, I dared to take up a new part. It was Shakespeare's *Henry V*. When the day of the *première* came, a fit of weakness and fainting forced me to cancel my appearance. The play had to be postponed till the 8th of March. On that night the auditorium of Drury Lane housed an alarmingly huge crowd. The public seemed to be feverishly excited. My friends feared for me, my enemies, those who could or would not distinguish the artist from the man, hoped for flaws in my interpretation.

Time to begin; yet the curtain did not go up. The overture was repeated several times. In the theatre the whispering and other noises swelled to a hostile tumult. Behind the scenes, in the dressing-room an endless coming and going prevailed, desperate speculation and doubt, because my state of health gave rise to grave anxiety. At last the curtain rose, the play began. In the second scene, when as Henry V, robed in carmine and purple velvet, seated on the golden throne, surrounded by the nobles of my court, I made my appearance, loud applause greeted me, followed by tense silence.

The Archbishop of Canterbury takes the word:

"God and the angels guard your sacred throne,
And make you long become it!"

Henry V replies. The first two or three sentences are spoken with monotonous precision. But already I pause, look with imploring glances towards the prompter, stammer, again speak a few words, hesitate, omit phrases, add some of my own and struggle despairingly against the mist clouding my memory.

My fellow players are seized by increasing nervousness. They try to come to my assistance by whispering the text. They themselves are losing their assurance. The public are set wondering; my friends are anxious and regretful, my opponents full of satisfaction and mockery. Like one wrecked in a storm, I seem to be tossed about in a nutshell battling frantically against the mountainous waves engulfing me.

The curtain falls. Ominous silence follows the incoherent, pathetic acting of the once "Beloved of the Gods".

A long interval ensues. The optimists among my friends hope for the best. But far more fatal than physical weakness and mental exhaustion is the shame that overpowers me. The second act irrevocably proves that I have gone to pieces and cannot claim the indulgence of a patient public; that my struggle with the part resembles the pitiable capers of a sentimental clown.

During the third act the forbearance of the public reaches its limit. Hissing, whistling, angry shouts surround me, whilst I, without seeming to turn a hair, try to navigate my leaking boat through the storm.

Between Acts 4 and 5 the interval seems endless. Utterly spent now, without an atom of strength left, I am lying on the couch in my dressing-room. From the body of the theatre calls for the manager are heard. The hissing and whistling swells to a hurricane. The noise does not abate even when the curtain rises again. I have dragged myself to the footlights to address the audience with a few words of apology.

Dumb, baffled and frightened I face the multi-headed monster whose shrieks and roars conjure up in me the painful Boston incidents. For minutes the noise persists; for minutes I endeavour to assume the conquering look of the lion-tamer, by means of which I once held my audience. At last the storm dies down; I am permitted to speak. With a voice trembling and uncertain I say:

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is now many years since I have had the honour to enjoy a large share of your approbation. You may conceive, therefore, how deeply I deplore this moment when for the first time I incur your displeasure."

"No, no, not the first time!" interpolates a hostile voice.

I stand ashamed as if publicly humiliated by a slap on the face. At my feet glare the lights. Below in the hall thousands of eyes look at me with the fire of battle.

I lift my hand, as it were in defence, and continue:

"If you wish that I should proceed, I must request your silence. For many years, give me leave to say, I have worked hard for your entertainment."

"You have been well paid for it!" another shrill voice calls.

A fresh humiliation!

I search for words. I feel my tongue heavy as lead and my eyes roaming aimlessly.

"That very labour," I stammer, "and the lapse of time and circumstances have no doubt had their effects upon my mind."

"Why do you drink so hard?"

A brutal blow! Pale, staggering, weary to death I stand pilloried. Nobody there to come to my rescue. A poor wretch, I am alone; the people there below, once my admirers applauding and cheering me, enjoy my tortures.

My voice sinks almost to a toneless whisper:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I feel that I stand before you in a most degraded situation."

Renewed interruption, cruel as those preceding:

"Why did you put yourself into it?"

Flames are shooting up before my eyes, a hammering in my brain. The whole universe seems to rock round me.

These are the fires of hell. In gloomy despair I begin to realize that my address to the public is degenerating more and more into a shameful and agonizing dialogue with my opponents thirsting for battle, whilst my adherents retreat in embarrassed silence. With the strength of desperation, therefore, I wrestle on in this fateful contest—yes, fateful!—and, already half lying on the floor, almost touching it with my shoulder, I jump up again and appeal to their sense of honour:

"You are my countrymen, and I appeal with confidence to that liberality which has always distinguished Englishmen."

Hand clasped to heart, hollow-eyed and sombre I bow humbly and continue my part, uncertain, absent-minded, with cracked and colourless voice.

The play closes in tumult and disturbance. My defeat is final.

The storm of emotions that had been battling in me and had given the knock-out blow to my weakened body and mind, made me write a letter to the management of Drury Lane a few days later.

It ran thus:

"I address you under the most painful feelings that human nature can endure—a loss of that by which I lived, the public favour, and my only hope. My only consolation in this extreme of misery is, that it was neither from want of attention to my duties nor want of recollection of their former kindness. It is that kindness that too much dazzled me. It was that that brought me to superhuman calculations, and favoured by the approbation of the public, I conceived myself invulnerable. Mind cannot be directed, as I have proved in this last most destructive issue. But want of memory is not want of heart, and while a pulsation is left, it beats with gratitude and affection to that public who brought me from obscurity into a light I never dreamt of, and it overpowered me. I find too late that

I must rest upon my former favours. My heart is willing, but my memory has flown. All that I have done I can and will; what is to do I leave to a rising generation. Kindness and urbanity will remember how long and zealously I have made my grateful bow to the British public, living on their smiles, destroyed by their censure, both of which I have comparatively deserved. Let me once more have to say, that the old spoiled favourite is forgiven; let me once more pursue that path which led me to your favour, and die in grateful recollection of the debt I owe to a sympathizing though sometimes an unjustly angry public."

It can be seen from this I was fighting for my art, my very life. I looked about me for a straw to which I, the drowning, could cling. A faint ray of hope seemed to glow on my horizon and I, only too eagerly, hailed it as a messenger of a better time to come.

When, however, I viewed my position without the glow of optimism I had to acknowledge it was hopeless. The last remnant of my will to live forsook me; the grey misery staring me in the face made me shiver to the marrow. In this state of mind I sent out a cry for help to W. R. Halpin, the editor of *The Star*, who so far had always taken my part in any fray. I wrote:

"Dear Halpin,

"Fight for me, I have no resources in myself; mind is gone, and body is hopeless. God knows my heart. I would do, but cannot. Memory, the first of goddesses, has forsaken me, and I am left without a hope but from those old resources that the public and myself are tired of. Damn, God damn ambition. The soul leaps, the body falls.

EDMUND KEAN"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LAST ACT

IT is hard to go downhill fast with seeing eyes without being able to slow down. Hard, indeed, to watch the ascent of others and to have to own up, nobody but oneself could be blamed for the fall.

The triumphs of younger artists, as Macready and Young, soon began to obscure my fame. Disease and physical weakness did the rest. I was forced to abandon my stronghold in the hearts of the British public.

As an artist, alas prematurely old and decrepit, though only forty-three—a burnt-out crater where one could sense the once unbridled fire even in the greyness of the cinders—it should have been my duty to withdraw from the theatre and give place to younger and more worthy talents. Yet the claims of costly living left me no other choice than to labour on under the hard yoke and to appear on the boards time and again for my daily bread.

I do not relish, by any means, speaking of the pitiable actor's life remaining to me. The account of my further stage career is a constant self-accusation. Yet I will relate it, lest the meaning of this my life-story should degenerate into absurdity.

It is true that at my first appearance after the failure of Henry V, in the part of King Richard III, I seemed to have caught some of my old fire, so that on the following day a newspaper wrote:

“To us it is a matter of doubt if he ever played Richard better than on Monday. It does credit to his feelings to record his agitation before he began. He felt that he had offended the public, and the fear of meeting their displeasure almost convulsed his frame. Perspiration rolled down his cheeks, and his nerves would have completely failed him had he not experienced so kind a reception. He recovered his self-possession instantly, and, Antheus-like, rose unhurt by his fall. His exclamation, ‘Richard’s himself again’, was heartily cheered by the audience, a compliment which he seemed to feel deeply. His basilisk glance at the young prince was absolutely withering, and forcibly reminded us of John Kemble’s answer to a friend who asked him what was Kean’s greatest recommendation—‘his eye, look at his eye, sir’.”



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CHARLES KEAN AS CLAUDE MELNOTTE
IN *The Lady of Lyons*



KEAN'S DEATH MASK
Drawn on Stone from a Mask by R. T. Bone

Later I appeared once more as Hamlet before the London public. I was received with great kindness, mingled perhaps with a little pity and sadness. As long as I stood on the stage facing the audience, the little elasticity that was left kept me going. No sooner had the curtain fallen than I was at the end of my powers. Unable to go to my dressing-room and return to the stage, I had to stay behind the scenes, there to fall into the first armchair available, and wait for my call. My attendant served me the while with steaming toddy, the only remedy to inspire me with the necessary courage to finish my part.

A longing for rest and peace had become strong in me. But the grief of being no longer a master in my beloved art, of being applauded and cheered by the audience, no longer played havoc with me like a devastating fever. Once a week at least I had to have the chance to appear before the public and to prove to them that I—Edmund Kean—would not, of my own free will, renounce in favour of others the place a glorious fate had allotted to me. And as it became increasingly difficult to satisfy my high demands and grant me the privileged position at Drury Lane or Covent Garden I believed I could command, I had to climb down, did I not wish to relinquish my life's work with silent drums, or play at inferior theatres to a public far from representing the élite of London.

My acting at the Victoria Theatre, formerly the Cobourg, a stage of low rank, was prompted by such motives. I appeared as Othello, whilst a mediocre actor Cobham assisted me as Iago. The incessant popping of corks from gingerbeer bottles furnished a discordant accompaniment to the play on the stage. I grew wildly exasperated at this gross display of tactlessness by a primitive public. Added to it was the fact that during the evening Cobham-Iago was being more heartily applauded than myself. The old demon Pride seized me once more: I refused to make my bow in front of the curtain at the end of the performance. When finally, however, I let myself be persuaded to do so, I appeared already half cleansed from paint and powder, a cloak carelessly thrown over my shoulders and stared gloomily at a public that had so irritated and wounded me.

"What do you want?" I rapped out, brief, forbidding, hostile, thus discharging my anger at this unworthy audience.

"Kean, Kean, Kean!" shouted as of old the crowd in stalls and circle.

"Well then! Here I am!" I replied haltingly, supporting myself on a halberd I had seized from somewhere. With eyes dilated

and glassy, fury sweeping through my veins, I shouted in a voice spent and hoarse:

"I have acted in every theatre in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and in all the principal towns throughout the United States of America, but in my life I never acted to such a set of ignorant, unmitigated brutes as I now see before me."

I spoke it, majestically threw one corner of the cloak over my shoulder, made a slight, contemptuous obeisance, and stalked off with the dignity of an offended lion.

Hushed silence followed my words. My fellow actors behind the scenes were trembling in their shoes, as they told me afterwards. The intense silence in stalls and circle seemed to grow ominously. Hostility seemed to brood over the house.

"I have caused many an uproar in the theatre," I ruminated obstinately, while waiting for the storm to break loose.

But instead of it, the call "Cobham" suddenly rang out from the gallery and rolling on, eagerly taken up by hundreds of throats, crashed like a breaker on the footlights, till amid the ensuing cheers the darling of the house was dragged before the curtain.

There he stood in the splendour of the lights—Cobham, flattered, a vain smile on his lips. He bowed many times to the faithful audience, laid his hand on his heart and turned finally, as the roaring applause did not seem to cease, with an improvised speech:

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is unquestionably the proudest moment of my life. I cannot give utterance to my feelings; but to the latest hour of my existence I shall cherish the remembrance of the honour conferred upon me by one of the most distinguished, liberal, and enlightened audiences I ever had the pleasure of addressing."

The cheers and acclamations for the favourite of this "enlightened" audience broke on my ear. But Edmund Kean had long vanished from the memory of this cheering crowd.

An engagement at the Haymarket Theatre, during which I once more acted in all my show parts, recalled to the mind of the public and to me the fact that twenty-four years ago in this house, I had appeared before them for the first time in small parts. This was, incidentally, an occasion to dwell on the inconstancy of fortune and success which had singled me out as their protégé, only to hurl me to ruin and misery at the pinnacle of my glory.

More and more it was borne in upon me that it was hardly

short of a farce that I, shadow of my former self, should still perform before the public, no matter how sympathetic and forbearing they were.

An actor is either a lion-tamer who with compelling glance, pistol and whip in hand, subdues the brutes in the stalls, or a poor charlatan whose dodges and tricks even the simplest spectator discovers.

Resigned, ashamed of myself, I staggered night after night to my dressing-room. I was animated by one desire: to say good-bye for ever to the boards where I had found such supreme happiness as well as much misfortune. But as it was my nature ever to play with fire, I planned to sail once more for America, there, perhaps, to find my last refuge.

The 19th of July 1830 witnessed my farewell performance in the King's Theatre, Haymarket. The London public seemed extremely agitated. There was here an opportunity for the last time to admire and cheer their one-time idol, spoiled though much criticized. Once more it was like old times. The theatre was stormed; windows and doors were smashed and fainting people carried to safety. The house was filled more than to capacity, even the orchestra space and the narrow passage behind the scenes were actually strewn with people. Then I appeared. I played once more chosen scenes from my favourite parts: Act 4 from *Richard III*; Act 4 from *The Merchant of Venice*; Act 5 from *A new Way to pay old Debts*; Act 2 from *Macbeth*; and Act 3 from *Othello*. It meant an immense physical and mental strain. Yet the uniqueness of the occasion, the solemnity of the atmosphere and not least the gratitude of the public, manifest by frantic applause and tributes of flowers and other gifts, helped to endow me with an endurance which saw me through all the difficulties of the evening.

The incessant roars of applause at the end called me over and over again before the curtain—was it the same curtain where I had stood up against many a hail of missiles, hurled at me by a fanatic and howling crowd?—I was obliged to make a speech to the audience—my audience—devout congregation and chiding judge combined. I said:

“Ladies and gentlemen, I hope that none of you can understand the pain and agitation which fills my heart at this climax of my career, or the acute suffering I endure now that I am about to quit the country that has given me birth, and the people whom I have adored, to visit a land where perhaps nothing but ill-health and sorrow await me. I feel it quite impossible to express my gratitude for the constant ebullitions of your appro-

bation which you have this night and always bestowed upon me. For the favour and popularity I have always enjoyed, the fact of performing in one night all my favourite characters was the best, the only return my gratitude could make you. I will not particularly allude to past or to future events, but now that I am about to leave you for ever, most earnestly from my heart I entreat that you will suffer no empirics to usurp the dramatic throne, to the ruin and disgrace of the drama. I must and will venture to assert, that the well-being of the stage is of the utmost consequence to a nation's morality. Ladies and gentlemen, the time has now arrived for me to return you all my most fervent thanks, and to bid you a long, a last farewell."

To the loud cheers and waving of hands the curtain slowly and finally fell. For the London public there was brought to an end the life-work of an actor who had often inspired, often offended them.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE CURTAIN DROPS

THE journey is drawing to a close. I feel it almost a favour that Fate should have granted me strength to use my pen as far as this chapter. The past is lying behind me like an open book and I am approaching the present—with a deep sigh of relief—or is it fear? Oh, what a present!

My plan to revisit America, there to end a life which, in its turbulent changes from triumphs to humiliations may well be called unique, met with unsurmountable obstacles. Increasing ill-health forced me to postpone the voyage again and again and to retire to my country-seat on Bute to repair my frayed nerves and wasted body. Even there amidst serene and untroubled nature it was not my good fortune to find peace.

The inexorable shadow behind me lifted its head, the shadow that had pursued me all my life. It grew with sinister rapidity, blotted out the sparse light in which my eyes delighted and spread cold and darkness about me.

An inner voice urged: "You must work if you want to live!"

I know I have no right to find excuses for my conduct. Life moves according to stern laws. Crime is followed by punishment and the climax of the drama by a compensating catastrophe.

I shall, therefore, only recount, not embellish. The reader of these chapters will be sufficiently discriminating to see things in their due perspective.

My pecuniary position was by now as precarious as my health. I had to support Mary; and Nance Carey, my mother, did not omit to remind me of her existence. In addition to these liabilities her daughter Phoebe, and Harry Darnley, another son of Nance, by a different father, showed me their attachment by writing begging letters commencing with "Dear Brother", and compelling me to take them and their poor chickens under my wing.

Fear of hard-pressing creditors soon drove me back to the footlights. It was the beginning of 1831. I knew it was contrary to my promise to quit the stage for good. Yet force of circumstances proved stronger than my solemn vow.

Even now there were still voices extolling my art; once in bygone days Samuel Coleridge had said about me, with reference to Richard III: "Seeing him act is like reading Shakespeare by

flashes of lightning"; now it was Leigh Hunt who wrote in *The Tattler*: "Garrick's nature displaced Quin's formalism; and in precisely the same way did Kean displace Kemble. Everything with Kemble was literally a personation—it was a mask and a sounding-pipe. It was all external and artificial. Kean's face is full of light and shade, his tones vary, his voice trembles, his eye glistens, sometimes with a withering scorn, sometimes with a tear." But I knew too well. This searching verdict referred to the whole of my art and work rather than to the interpretations which I was able to put before the public in these days.

The malice of a perverse destiny must have guided me to form the idea of leasing the Royal Theatre at Richmond, and that at a time when the actor's laurels were no longer in my reach. It is true, I did not reckon with the heavy responsibilities and business worries a theatre manager has to incur. The result of my endeavours was a lamentable one. Instead of being able to clear my old debts, I had contracted new ones; the cares, disappointments and bitter experiences of an unlucky manager eventually sapped me of the remaining power of resistance.

Indeed, after the conclusion of Mr. Klanert's management, when I opened the theatre unusual enthusiasm prevailed at Richmond among the old frequenters of this favourite place of amusement, and much interest was evinced to witness the "marvellous acting of the great tragedian". But later, when the attraction wore off, the houses became gradually smaller and smaller, and I played to empty benches, one night three pounds sixteen shillings being the sum total of the proceeds.

I feel that I am at the end of my days. The radiant, blaring colours in my life have melted into gloomy twilight. The deep lines in my face speak of joy and grief, of a life gambled away in waste. Yet the eyes that once were 'shining lights' are still searching for lost happiness.

Behind me a varied, a chequered life! Before me the future, what may it still hold in store for me? What has become of the fighter's passionate temperament? Weary resignation has taken its place. Looking back on my wrecked life Percy Hotspur's words leap to my mind:

*Thought's the slave of life, and life time's fool;
And time, that takes survey of all the world,
Must have a stop. . . .*

At this point I should like to pay my warmest tribute to Miss Tidswell, "Aunt Tid" who had already cared for me when I was

a child. She was one of the few who took my part when the whole world rose to chastise me for adultery with Charlotte Cox. After forty years of work she left Drury Lane to brighten the last days of her "idol, Edmund". During her walks with me through Richmond Park, a small lively figure by the side of the pale decrepit man with the big, almost timid eyes, she is like a good angel accompanying the soul of a poor sinner to his doom.

Aunt Tid's affection for me springs from a great and sympathetic heart. With her there are no accusations, there is only compassion. The tender, clear look in her eyes never leaves me. I have often disappointed Aunt Tid, often have I made her suffer, yet not once have I heard these lips, though thin and void of all charm, utter a sound of reproach or complaint.

Kindly Aunt Tid! You never reaped much thanks for your devotion to your big, spoiled, worthless boy. Yet I can read in the warm glow of your ever-watchful eyes that there are people whom God has blessed with the wondrous gift of self-sacrifice.

The inhabitants of the ancient and picturesque town on the banks of the River Thames watch me with regret when I walk slowly and painfully, ever and anon stopping to rest myself upon the agate-handled stick which I had used at all times as Sir Giles Overreach. Sometimes I gently make my way up to the summit of Richmond Hill, there to refresh myself in the afternoon sunshine, a welcome breeze blowing round me, and to take delight in tracing

*The matchless vale of Thames,
Far winding up to where the Muses haunt
In Twickenham's bowers. . . .*

When autumn mists hang heavily in the air I stay at home, in a house next to the Richmond Theatre. I sit over the fire shivering, becoming absorbed in Plato's arguments on the immortality of the soul, in the divine eloquence of Shakespeare, and in the master touches of my favourite Cicero. Or I go to the piano and sing a few songs in a cracked voice to the few friends who visit me.

Minor joys to this exile are: tears of sympathy and compassion from a visitor; thanks of the poorest townsfolk who receive gifts from me on my walks as from a grandseigneur.

But during my lonely hours I ponder over my life and the ultimate meaning of the art of play-acting. I poke the fire and all kinds of thoughts seem to dance round me in restless movement like tongues of fire round the burning logs. I muse: The actor

is like an onion. Each layer is a part he plays. Take it to pieces, strip after strip, and you gather round yourself a heap of precious parts. What, however, is the core of this? Maybe only another layer, only a part! . . .

We are writing in the year 1832. The winter is damp and unpleasant. From the window, my forehead pressed to the cold pane, I often watch the dance of the snowflakes that, as soon as they touch the windowsill, dissolve in drops of water.

When darkness sets in, I know it is time for the actor to leave his home or the tavern where he has spent the afternoon playing at dice and drinking. He has to wend his way to the theatre. The scenery is being shifted in position, the lights kindled. The call-boy will soon knock at the doors of dressing-rooms to give his stereotyped cry "Time to appear". In the auditorium, all anticipation and excitement, the public take their seats whispering, scanning their programmes. Now the signal for the curtain to rise! Splendour clothes the actors, a splendour communicating itself to the audience. The magic unfolds, this powerful nightly magic that can weld a house of a thousand people into a single pulsing organism. But Kean—Edmund Kean—will not stand in the footlights. The applause of the public is poured out for other, younger artists. Who still thinks of Kean? Who, indeed, realizes that at this very moment he is cooling his feverish forehead at a cold windowpane? That he is far removed from the field of battle, lonely and forgotten? . . .

Here is my mother living with me, Nance Carey, the tramp and gipsy woman. She found her way home to her celebrated son. When she entered the door, old, spent, and yet still with a fanatic zest for life, scales fell from my eyes. As I looked into her dark eyes, as fiery as ever, I felt that we two could read our destinies from each other's deeply lined face.

"I am now as old as you, Mother," I said to her, smiling mysteriously, my heart beating evenly. "Death is equally near to both of us."

I am passing my days with these two old women. Nance Carey, though guarding my house, still longs for the open road; Aunt Tid, like a lean bird, spreading her protecting wings over my nest, determined to defend it against any odds.

My financial difficulties are growing; one creditor after another invades my house. They even disturb me in my work of writing these lines; they insist on their legal rights. My credit grows from bad to worse. Who would lend money to a man half in his grave?

Suspicious looks run over me from top to toe. These philistines fear for their shillings. What do they know of Edmund Kean and the flight of his soul? Perhaps, after all, they are right. From the viewpoint of an ant, irregularity is deemed the gravest of all crimes. I repeated so frequently: never in all my life could I comprehend the full meaning of that commodity money. For many years my revenues amounted to £10,000 and more, threefold the sum that the best of my colleagues could ever command. Yet as easily as I made it I would spend it. It is true, I was an Epicurean in my tastes; surrounded by parasites and flatterers; I was cheated out of large sums, besides. I paid bills without examining them, and trusted to others in all matters of finance. I gave away, or was fleeced out of half my earnings. The affair with Charlotte Cox was a heavy drain on my resources; Ophelia Benjamin with her scheming tactics did her share in sending me to the brink of ruin.

Thus I see myself obliged for the sake of earning some money, to reappear on the stage, though the hand of death is already upon me. Captain Polhill, the present leaseholder of Drury Lane, has invited me to act as guest artist. But as he is refusing my request to pay me a part sum in advance—what does a Polhill know of the glorious past of a Kean and of the respect due to a valiant fighter!—I can foresee that the negotiations will probably break down.

My doctor and friend Dr. James Smith has again been examining me to-day. Result:

"You must give up the idea of ever returning to the stage, dear Kean. A man like you ought to be satisfied with his recollections. And what recollections of glorious times!"

Hence, nothing remains to me but to wait for a lucky chance to guide my steps once more on to the boards, that was my world. Till then I shall pace restlessly the length and breadth of my little room which is my shelter; shall walk with measured tread the quiet streets of Richmond, an exhausted invalid aiming at the nearest bench for rest.

The children pause in their play and stare after me in wonder. Their fathers and mothers point their finger at me saying:

"Look, there is one who wasted his life. One who gambled away his health by living unwisely. Look at the demi-god now, how the guise of a clown hangs loose on his lean body. There are people who imagine they were created to perform miracles and thereby conquer the world. They are so full of life, and laughter, of strength and vainglorious assurance that they do not

see that even the birds are mocking at them. Retribution will come one day. And then? There they lie on the ground, helpless, a mockery to God's honest folk. Look closely, children. There again is the story of the eternal player. Life meant nothing, the part everything! And when the curtain was rung down for the last time, he stood there with empty hands, painted and powdered in broad daylight. The people that passed him applauded him no more. . . ."

Here end Edmund Kean's notes. The brief span of life left to him will require only a short account. The actor's yearning, only once more to appear before his public, was to be granted to him. Like one drowning, Kean seized the offer. He set out to view, like Moses, the Promised Land—to him the one and only London.

At that time Covent Garden was about to engage Charles Kean, Edmund's son. During many years of earnest work throughout the Kingdom as well as in the United States he had matured to a fine and valuable artist. He was to appear as Iago at the side of his father as Othello. It was to be an artistic event and Laporte, the manager, thought, no doubt, that a golden harvest would be the result.

The performance was announced for the 25th of March 1833. Charles had not seen his father for some time. When they met in the dressing-room before the beginning of the play Charles was startled at the terrible change wrought in his father; at his pitiable, shrunken body that could hardly keep erect, at the gaunt and wasted face in which the dark eyes flickered wild yet timid at the same time.

The meeting was a sad one; it threw a gloomy shadow over the coming show.

"I feel very ill, Charles!" whispered Edmund Kean and sank back on to the couch. "I am afraid I shall not be able to perform."

The fear of losing the splendid box-office returns induced the manager to persuade his famous guest to cheer up; all would be well with him. Hot toddy was brought, yet Kean's poor sick body would not stop shivering and shaking. An attendant dressed him from head to foot; the hairdresser made him up for Othello, the Moor, though the nauseous process of browning his face occasioned sickness. Then the signal was given for the curtain to rise.

Cordial applause greeted the old favourite. With tears welling up in his eyes, with a vague movement of his hand indicating

that he was ready to clasp the public to his heart, he bowed several times. Then turning to his son Charles and taking his hand he led him to the footlights, so sharing with him the acclamations. This paternal gesture doubled the enthusiasm of the audience. It seemed to revive Kean and to give him the confidence he so much needed. Thus the prospects of the evening were improving.

He played with visible effort, yet well controlled. During the first interval in his dressing-room surrounded by his colleagues he said patronizingly:

"Charles is getting on well to-night—he's playing very well; I suppose it's because he's acting with me."

But already the following act seemed to overtax Kean's strength. His voice sank to an inaudible whisper. Heavy and hesitating came the words from his lips. He was frequently forced to pause. It was painful to watch him. It was obviously testing the patience of the audience.

Before Act 3 Kean, feeling that the part was beyond his physical endurance, turned in great anxiety to his son:

"Mind, Charles, that you keep before me. Don't get behind me this act. I don't know that I shall be able to kneel; but if I do so, be sure that you lift me up."

In spite of this painful presentiment he forced himself to play his part to the end. The public had the impression as if the inner conflict of the drama lent him wings. They followed in breathless agitation the great scene between Othello and Iago. Deeply stirred, the house listened to Kean's words:

"O, now, for ever

Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!
Farewell the plumed troop and the big wars
That make ambition virtue! O, farewell!
Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!
And, O you mortal engines, whose rude throats
The immortal Jove's dread clamours counterfeit,
Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone!"

The profound sadness with which these words were spoken roused the audience to stormy applause.

The great Kean stood on the stage motionless. The applause, these fanfares of victory that had so often sounded in his ears like

warmth-giving music, carried him back to old and forgotten times. The auditorium vanished from his sight and his youth with all its glorious triumphs was there before him.

With bowed head, his lustreless eyes fixed on the ground, he stood far removed from this worldly sphere long after the last cheers had died away.

Tense silence followed and recalled Kean to the present. With misty, weary eyes he gave a last look at his audience. Then Charles continued his part:

"Is't possible, my Lord?—"

With staggering steps Othello moved towards Iago. With cracked voice and a last supreme effort Edmund Kean stammered:

"Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore . . ."

But instead of seizing Iago by the throat to throttle him, Kean, sobbing convulsively, fell on his son's neck and could only stammer before losing consciousness:

"O, God, I am dying—speak to them for me!"

Charles caught his fainting father in his arms. The audience rose with loud cheers of encouragement upon witnessing the painful sight; but Kean was at once carried off from the stage. The curtain was dropped and the performance abandoned. It was singular that Kean should end his career in the arms of his son, and that that son's future wife—Miss Ellen Tree—should be the Desdemona on this occasion.

Edmund Kean lay for hours in his dressing-room without regaining consciousness. Later he was taken to the Wrekin Tavern, Broadcourt, near by. There he lay battling with death, still in the mask of Othello, too weak even to bear the operation of having the paint removed. Nobody had dared to molest the dying man.

Finally, after a slight improvement, he was moved to his Richmond house, where Aunt Tid, helpful as ever, nursed him with great devotion.

Weeks of anxiety went by in which large circles of the public seemed to share. Little hope was entertained of Kean's ever regaining his strength. It seemed only a question of how long this poor, consumed body, this poor, harassed mind would withstand the last onslaughts.

Charles, realizing that there was but little time left, thought it

his filial duty to effect a reconciliation between his parents. For eight years they had lived apart.

Edmund consented. On Charles's advice he appealed to the woman who at his side had witnessed his wonderful ascent to fame. With trembling hand he wrote:

"My dear Mary,

"Let us be no longer fools. Come home; forget and forgive. If I have erred, it was my head, not my heart, and most severely have I suffered for it. My future life shall be employed in contributing to your happiness; and you, I trust, will return that feeling by a total obliteration of the past.

"Your wild, but really affectionate husband,

EDMUND KEAN"

On receipt of this letter Mary hastened at once to Richmond to the bedside of her husband. But the sight of this emaciated dying man was so overwhelming that she broke down. She could not bring herself to return to him entirely, as Kean had requested, but she came to see him frequently till he died.

During the following weeks Kean's mind became more and more confused. He battled with life, battled with memories, with wild visions. His financial position was extremely bad. A few days before he died a creditor agitated for his arrest, though the debt only amounted to about £100. It was due only to Aunt Tid's untiring and loving endeavours that this last bitter fate was averted from the dying Kean.

It was now the middle of May. Kean could recognize the people round him no more. He seemed to talk to persons who were not there. The characters which he had so often played seemed to hover round his bed: Richard III, Othello, Hamlet, Sir Giles Overreach, Shylock, King Lear—they were all about him and apparently troubled him much.

Lear, fantastically decked with flowers, with flowing beard and visionary eyes declaimed:

"Ay, every inch a king:

When I do stare, see how the subject quakes.

I pardon that man's life.—What was thy cause?—

Adultery?—

Thou shalt not die: die for adultery! No:

The wren goes to't, and the small gilded fly

Does lecher in my sight.

Let copulation thrive; for Gloster's bastard son

Was kinder to his father than my daughters

Got 'tween the lawful sheets. . . ."

Kean rambled on: phantoms seemed to be with the restlessly dreaming Richard III in his war tent. The ghost of Queen Anne rose and whispered to him a sad story:

“Richard, thy wife, that wretched Anne thy wife,
That never slept a quiet hour with thee,
Now fills thy sleep with perturbations:
To-morrow in the battle think on me,
And fall thy edgeless sword: despair and die!”

Kean tossed about on his sick-bed and gasped out:

“All several sins, all us'd in each degree,
Throng to the bar, crying all, Guilty! guilty! . . .”

Then his restless, confused mind took him to other parts. Kean went with Hamlet to the churchyard and held converse with the grave-digger:

“This same skull, sir, was Yorick's skull, the king's jester.”

“This?”

“E'en that.”

Kean sighed and smiled mysteriously:

“Alas, poor Yorick!—I knew him, Horatio; a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! my gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? . . .”

Kean dropped his arms, hopeless and shuddering. The graves were gaping, the skulls grinning at him; the air was pregnant with decay.

Drab lights were flickering over the feverish face and from his lips came incoherent words.

The blinds of the sick-room were drawn. As he lay there he rattled in his throat: “I am dying. It is all over.”

Aunt Tid bent over him and wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

“I must go now to the theatre; I must play. If I only could find somebody to take my place!”

And when Aunt Tid tenderly stroked his hands he gasped out:

“It would be better to cut the death scene; or perhaps the pro-

ducer better announces that Mr. Kean cannot play his part as he is not well."

Aunt Tid sitting near his bed sobbed silently. The dying Kean looked at her in suspicion.

"Illusion!—Illusion! Everything is artificial, no nature left. . . ."

At midnight of the same day—weariness had sent Aunt Tid to sleep—Kean sat up suddenly with a jerk and jumped out of bed, shouting desperately:

"A horse! a horse! my kingdom for a horse!" and sank in a swoon to the floor.

The following day—it was 15th May 1833, nine o'clock in the morning—Edmund Kean opened his eyes and looked at those standing near his bedside. In this look was understanding and gratitude. He tried to speak, but no sound would come from his parched lips. Stretching his hand towards Aunt Tid he sighed and breathed his last. He was forty-six years old.

The news of Kean's death spread rapidly through all London. Eulogies spoke of the triumphal career, so suddenly and cruelly broken off.

Kean's friends endeavoured to have him buried in Westminster Abbey by the side of David Garrick. They approached the necessary authorities and asked them whether they would forgo the high fees generally demanded for such burial. It was, however, refused. So Edmund Kean was buried in Richmond.

The interment was solemn and dignified. Nearly every member of the dramatic profession in London attended to pay the last token of respect to one who had so often delighted his audience. Many friends and admirers of Kean joined the procession of mourners. The bells tolled. All shops in Richmond were closed. The townspeople lined the streets where the procession had to pass. Many were in tears. Not least mourned the poor of the town; they had lost a generous friend.

Near the west gate of the old Richmond Parish Church, by the side of the bones of Shakespeare's friend Richard Burbage, the first interpreter of Richard III, Kean found his last resting place.

Over the open grave a clergyman spoke the blessing. A choir sang Handel's solemn composition, "His body is buried in peace, but his name shall live for evermore."

The handfuls of earth fell with a muffled sound on the coffin and the grave enclosed what had remained of Kean's earthly shell.

Kean's mother died a week after him. She was just about to

leave the lonely house to return to her element, the open road.

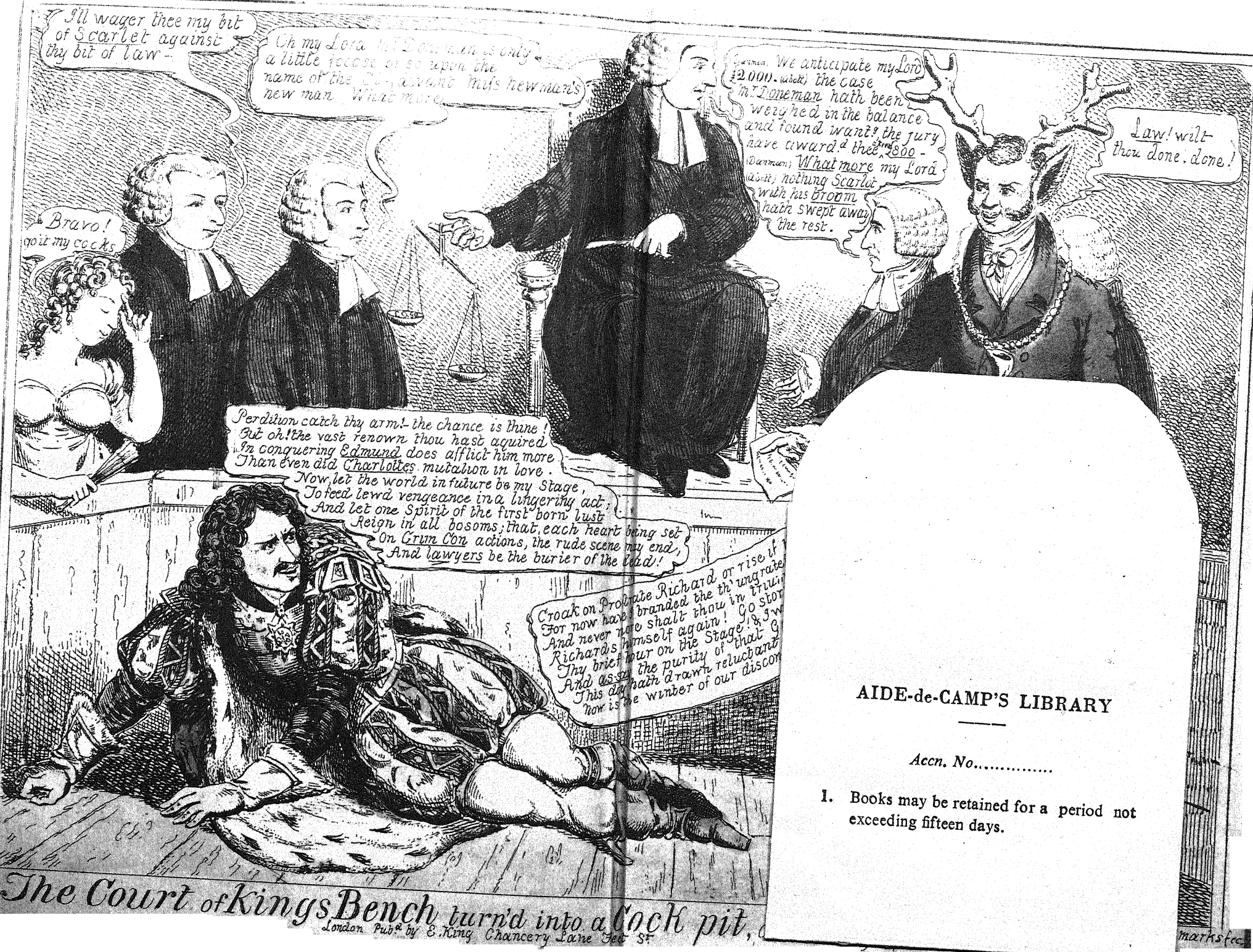
The creditors auctioned Kean's estate, his theatrical costumes, the gifts he had received during his brilliant career, the china and furniture of his houses on Bute and in Richmond.

Thus fell the curtain on the restless and stormy life of a man whom nature had endowed with all the human frailties, yet from whose eyes radiated a divine spark. When the fire of genius having spent itself before its time died away, the yearnings and passions of a human soul reaching up to the stars and delving into the darkest places of the underworld, died at the same time.

Rain fell on the grave of one never satisfied, with heart ever aflame. The winds moaned over it, perhaps wafting along a voice whose sound had brought tears and laughter to thousands.

“A pick-axe and a spade, a spade,
For and a shrouding sheet:
O, a pit of clay for to be made
For such a guest is meet. . . .”

Poor Yorick! . . .



I'll wager thee my bit
of Scarlet against
thy bit of law -

Oh my Lord, but Doneman is only
a little jocosse or so upon the
name of the Co-advocate this new man's
new man. What more.

Yes, we anticipate my Lord
the case
in Doneman hath been
weighed in the balance
and found want; the jury
have award'd thee 1800 -
What more my Lord
nothing Scarlet
with his broom
hath swept away
the rest.

Law! wilt-
thou done, done!

Bravo!
goit my cocks.

Perdition catch thy arm! the chance is thine!
But oh! the vast renown thou hast acquired
in conquering Edmund does afflict him more
Than even did Charlottes mutation in love.

Now let the world in future be my Stage,
To feed lowd vengeance in a lingering act;
And let one Spirit of the first born lust
Reign in all bosoms; that each heart being set
On Grim Con actions, the rude scene may end,
And lawyers be the burier of the dead!

Croak on Probate Richard or rise if
For now have branded the th' ungrate
And never more shalt thou in truth
Richard's himself again! Go store
Thy brief hour on the Stage! & I will
And as see the purity of that
This day hath drawn reluctant
now is the winter of our discom

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